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A S T O N - R O Y A L .

VOL. III.

ASTON-ROYAL.

BY

THE AUTHOR OF

“ST. OLAVE’S,” “JANITA’S CROSS.”

&c., &c.

“Be the day weary, be the day long,
At length it ringeth to Evensong.”

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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ASTON-ROYAL.

CHAPTER I.

TEN years passed away after that “disgraceful affair,” as people called the closing scene of Mr. Macnorman’s residence at the old Court-house. The big, bustling town of Aston-Royal grew still bigger and more bustling. New societies were instituted, new clubs were organised, new shops were built, new factories sprung up. Warehouses of every conceivable style of architecture—Ionic, Doric, Corinthian, Composite, Byzantine, Italian, Gothic, Moorish, Egyptian and Jelly-mould-ornate, supplanted the quaint, picturesque houses with lattice-windows and mossy eaves, which a few of the very old inhabitants still remembered and mourned

over. The chariot of progress careered along more vigorously than ever, the Jehu of adventurous speculation driving it at a pace which no existing laws of traffic on that road prohibited as "dangerous." Fortunes waxed and fortunes waned. Nowhere were those wings wherewith riches are popularly supposed to be provided, so swift and strong of flight as in Aston-Royal, or so ready to bring their burden back, when a change in the fashions or a turn in the markets set the fortunate merchant on his feet again. A magnificent public hall was built on the site of a nest of decaying almshouses, where, since the days of Queen Elizabeth, successive relays of old men and women had contrived to spend the evening of their days in peace and quiet. The once well-behaved and dutiful borough learned to hold indignation meetings, and convene demonstrations, and to mutter wrathfully about the "claims of the masses," and to shake its fist in a menacing manner at the Houses of Parliament, and to

talk in very large capital letters about the rights of the working people, and to assert its newly patented independence after a fashion which made public lecturers speak of it as "an important political centre," and of its numerous daily papers as the "mouthpieces of English opinion," epithets which always produced perfect hailstorms of applause when pronounced with due oratorical emphasis from the rostrum of the new town-hall.

But still, as heretofore, one spot, even in Aston-Royal, kept its doors resolutely shut against all clamour of modern improvement. Still the slant sunlight of summer evenings, glancing athwart the ruined Priory column, flushed the worn and mouldering gables of the old Court-house, and kissed into beauty of russet and olive and gold the lichens which clustered on its red-tiled roof, and pierced through garniture of vine and ivy into those oak-panelled rooms, where royal heads had lain them down to rest, and crowned brows unbent

from cares of state. Still the rooks cawed, and the blackbirds piped from the gnarled old elms in the quadrangle. Still, like trusty sentinels and doughty knights, the tall fantastically clipped box-trees kept guard over the trim walks and balustraded terraces, which once were trodden by foot of dainty princess or jewelled queen. Still the winter moonlight played in many a pearly glimmer upon the dormer windows of the western front, and lay broad and bright upon the mossy parapet, though no crimson-robed figure leaned her white arm there, and no little meek unconscious maiden stood in the oriel beneath with folded hands and wistful waiting face.

Part of the building was still rented, as heretofore, by widows and elderly spinster gentlewomen. But the Aston-Royal Insurance Company no longer made the western side of the quadrangle its head-quarters. In consequence of a rapid increase of business, the concern had been removed to larger premises, and now oc-

cupied a huge block of buildings in the centre of the town, close to Mr. Van Brooten's miniature mosque of a factory. After remaining for some time untenanted, the Court-house passed into the hands of Romilly Macnorman, who had just returned from a nine years' residence in Melbourne, to take the place of second partner in the firm of Mason and Co.

Romilly's good taste, together with the ample means which were now at his disposal, had made the old summer palace into a beautiful home. He restored it as nearly as possible to its original state. The colour-wash with which former tenants had defaced the wainscoting of some of the chambers and corridors, was cleared away. The oriels were filled with stained and pictured glass. Suits of armour and Indian curiosities decorated the wide low entrance. The furniture was of oak, quaint, massive, antique; and but for the matronly lady of modern garb and appearance who dispensed the hospitalities of the place, and the

three rosy-faced little lads, in round jackets and knickerbockers, who scampered up and down the passages, a stranger passing through the old Court-house might have fancied himself transplanted three centuries back to the old Tudor times, when Elizabeth and her maidens kept holiday there.

Mrs. Romilly Macnorman had developed into a comely, pleasant, motherly woman, not quite so piquant, not quite so animated, not quite so sparkling as the Lucy Thoresby of ten years ago,—with no pretty dash of sauciness about her now, no playful raillery, no sweet consciousness of a woman's power to charm; but instead, the watchful care and quiet, unobtrusive dutifulness of the wife who feels that she has no other and more brilliant qualities wherewith to retain her husband's love. In all things she was very meek, very submissive to her lord and master; more so, perhaps, because in ten years of outwardly prosperous married life there had grown up very strongly in her affectionate lit-

tle heart what was beginning to shape itself there before she became Romilly Macnorman's wife—the feeling that there was not enough of her for him. She did her best to satisfy him. She devoted herself entirely to the filling up of his life, but at the same time she felt, and often very sadly felt, that she never could quite fill it up—that he wanted more than she could give him—that some other woman's brightness, cleverness, beauty, or wit might have made him perhaps more happy than her humble, self-denying love could ever do.

Still, there was no outward jarring in their home. Lucy had married her husband simply and entirely because she loved him; and though Romilly could not with absolute honesty say so much of his own matrimonial venture, seeing that his proposal to Lucy arose out of a temporary disgust which drove him away from Bertha Dolfen, she did nevertheless occupy a warm, safe place in his heart, and never since they were married had he seen any other wo-

man who could be to him, on the whole, quite so much as she was. This was not saying a great deal, certainly, as Romilly owed to himself sometimes, but it was enough to guarantee a fair average amount of domestic peace; and as for bliss and delight, and all that sort of thing, Romilly never had experienced them yet, and never expected to do so. He married because it was almost necessary, under the circumstances, that he should take some one out with him to Melbourne; and his marriage had turned out, thanks to his own faithfulness and Lucy's love, a better venture so far than many which seemed to have a perfectly safe foundation to start with.

Lucy was a dear, good, amiable little wife—he could not help owning that—a doting mother, an admirable though somewhat over-anxious manager. He was obliged to praise her dutifulness, even when he could not admire her brilliance. Then she had an unbounded faith in him, never thought of questioning the reason-

ableness of anything which he required, obeyed him as implicitly as the needle obeys the magnet, and worshipped him to the full extent of her power of worship, which last little touch of weakness was, for a man of Romilly Macnorman's homage-loving nature, a considerable commendation. And if sometimes the thought crossed his mind that a more stylish or imposing woman would have suited him better; or if, in the society of exceptionally cultured and gifted people, he felt slightly ashamed of the simple, domestic little housewife whose intellectual horizon was bounded by Pinnock's Catechism and Mangnall's Questions; or if, in times of unusual mental activity, he would fain have had for his life-companion one who could, if not follow, at least appreciate his subtler thoughts, and be the sharer of his higher existence as well as the partner of his daily social needs, he generally brought himself back to a contented frame of mind by reflecting that a woman who could satisfy his requirements in that direc-

tion would in all probability have had less patience than Lucy had with his somewhat overbearing manner and tendency to domestic absolutism. Wives were very much like servants, Romilly used to say. If you wanted immaculate temper you must have plainness and plod along with it. If you wanted quickness, brightness, intelligence, you must make up your mind to a spice of something the reverse of angelic in the disposition which generally accompanies these mental qualifications.

People wondered at first that young Mr. Macnorman should venture to come back from Melbourne and fix his permanent residence in a place from which his father had been obliged, not so very long before, to skulk away in disgrace. True, he had come back as second partner in one of its most extensive firms, and was possessed of wealth and talents which entitled him to take his position amongst the best families in Aston-Royal; but

still facts were facts, and everybody said it argued a great amount of confidence, if not something amounting almost to presumption, for a young man to attempt to establish himself again in a town where the very name which he bore was associated, in the memories of most of the inhabitants, with infamy, disgrace, and guilt.

Mrs. Egremont in particular—still a most active and voluble exponent of Postern Chapel views and opinions—thought that prosperity was smiling in altogether too familiar a manner upon the son of the expelled manager. And she therefore took occasion, on every available opportunity, to recall the past to Mr. Romilly's recollection by allusion to events which happened in "your poor dear father's time, you know, Mr. Macnorman, just before he left the Insurance Company;" or to changes which were going on at Stowness, "near that cottage of old Mrs. Thoresby's—I daresay you remember it, Mr. Macnorman—where your father died.

Painful affair that, was it not, about your father's illness and death; very humiliating for a man of his disposition. I should think you would be very much shocked to hear about it." Because, as Mrs. Egremont said when hints were dropped about her own father's connection with the chimney-sweeping profession, if there were times when silence was a virtue, there were also times when a judicious reference to the past might have a profitable effect in checking the pride which goeth before destruction, and moderating the descent of the haughty spirit which precedes a fall.

But Romilly did not appear to care much, not half so much as Mrs. Egremont would have liked him to care. His was not a temper which suffered outsiders to feast upon its humiliation, or even owned to them that any thrusts of theirs could reach it. He manifested what Mrs. Egremont considered a culpable hardness respecting his unfortunate father's decline and fall from the splendours of Chris-

tian profession; and indeed met her attempts to press the memory of that decline and fall upon him as a disciplinary process with such self-possessed effrontery and coolness that she was compelled to retire from the exercise of her Christian duty, conscious for once that the wounds she had received were more mortifying than those she had endeavoured to inflict. Trying to put down Romilly Macnормan was something like trying the same experiment with an India-rubber ball. The harder it is struck the more vigorously it rebounds, frequently into the striker's face, making him wish very much he had been wise enough to let it alone. And so, after a few very ineffectual attempts at what she called speaking the truth in love, Mrs. Egremont found that silence was her wisdom, and subsided into it accordingly.

Romilly Macnормan had not changed very much during nine years of colonial prosperity, except to harden a little externally, as bright,

clever, successful men are apt to harden when things go well with them, and no temptations meet them but those which they are able to resist and overcome. At seven and thirty he was, to all intents and purposes, the same man that he had been at seven and twenty. He brought back to Aston-Royal the entertaining social qualities which had made him so popular at its dinner-tables and evening-parties; the confidence, coolness, and assurance which had done their work so quickly upon Bertha Dolfen; and, added to these, was a certain middle-aged importance, not to call it ponderosity, which was becoming, rather than otherwise, to a man who had done well for himself in the world, and who was able to hold his own with any man in Aston-Royal for guineas or five-pound notes, or sharp clever speeches at a public meeting.

Mrs. Van Brooten, expansive, highly-coloured, and good-natured as ever, still prospered in her splendid villa on the London Road, and

gave stupendous entertainments, where gentlemen meandered about amongst the yellow satin furniture, and young ladies flirted in draperies of all the hues of the rainbow, just as they had meandered and flirted ten years ago, when Romilly Macnorman, doing the polite to heavy, brocaded dowagers, heard a few sweet wandering guitar notes, and glancing in the direction whence they came, espied a low-browed, dark-looking girl receiving with more than imperial nonchalance the homage of a group of Aston-Royal cavaliers. A scene that which stood out perhaps more prominently in young Mr. Macnorman's memory than it had any need to do, seeing that he was now possessed of a sweet-tempered, pleasant looking wife of his own, and three as merry bright-eyed boys as any man could wish to see romping round his paternal arm-chair.

But perhaps it was only coming back to the old scenes and renewing the old friendships

that made him dwell so frequently on the memories which were associated with them, and nurse with an interest deepening, as he fostered it, almost into regret, upon that far-off night when Bertha Dolfen's face, and Bertha Dolfen's smile, and Bertha Dolfen's luring siren-like ways had first cast their spell over him. Be that as it might, Romilly Macnorman seldom found any hours more pleasant than those he began to spend again, soon after his return to Aston-Royal, in the room where the haughty West Indian beauty had first clasped hands with him. And if in moonlight evenings he happened to saunter alone into the Court-house-garden for a few minutes, a spirit in his feet nearly always led him into that narrow yew-tree walk from which he could look up to the parapet over whose mossy mouldering battlements he had once leaned with Bertha Dolfen by his side. Poor Bertha Dolfen! He might recall her red-ripe smile with little danger now, for neither time nor chance nor

Good nor evil-fortune, surely, was likely to bring him face to face with its splendour any more.

Mr. Bardon Limpsie, whose affections were somewhat akin to

“ The Borealis race,
Which flit ere you can point their place.”

had not, as Mrs. Van Brooten feared he would have done, led Matilda Egremont to the matrimonial altar; but greatly to the disappointment of that young lady, and the indignation of her mamma, had gone on a pleasure trip to Holland, and brought thence, after due preparation for her at home, a sturdy, substantial, matter-of-fact *Frau*, who ruled herself, her husband, and her household with steady-going correctness. The only other change worthy of note in Aston-Royal was the death of Mr. Moore, of the firm of Moore, Mason and Co., and the purchase of his magnificent private house, close to that of Mr. Van Brooten, on the London Road, by a

foreign merchant, a man of enormous wealth, as report said, who had lately come to England, and who had been advised by his physician, and persuaded by his wife, to settle in the north of England, for the sake of its bracing, invigorating climate.

Some said he came from India, some from China, where he had amassed a fortune in the tea-trade; others were of opinion that he was an Australian millionaire or a Californian nabob, sprung, like Mr. Van Brooten, out of nothing, and doing equal credit to his antecedents. But whatever might be his origin, his wealth was a fact of which no doubt could be entertained, judging from the manifestations of it which were put forth in the preparing of his new home at Aston-Royal. The house was being entirely refitted and decorated by artists from London, in a manner which even Mrs. Van Brooten herself pronounced to be extravagantly magnificent, quite superior to anything which had been done before in the town. The

purchase was completed and the alterations commenced a few months after Mr. and Mrs. Macnorman returned from Melbourne; and now, just a year having passed since their settlement at home, upholsterers were busy laying down carpets, putting up curtains, and arranging the splendid suite of furniture which had been purchased in London or on the Continent. In the course of a week or two it was expected that the new comers, Mr. and Mrs. Decameron, would take possession of their house; and Mrs. Van Brooten, who, whatever else she might neglect, never neglected the duties of hospitality, was even now considering within herself on what scale of splendour the dinner should be conducted with which she purposed honouring her wealthy neighbours, and bidding them welcome to the town of Aston-Royal.

CHAPTER II.

AND what of Tressa, to whom a light that seemed scarcely daylight had come at last?

After Mr. Macnorman's death, which followed closely upon that of Martin Thoresby, the cottage at Stowness was given up. Old Margaret was elected to a hospital for the widows of seamen, and Tressa came to live with Mrs. Thoresby, in her suite of apartments at the south side of Aston-Royal Court-house. There she stayed, year after year, living a pleasant, useful, contented life, such as all may live, who, achieving the true woman's destiny of loving and being loved, fail to achieve the other and sometimes less sunny destiny of marrying and

being married. To Martin's grandmother she was as a daughter, tending the decline of a life which had been full of mercy and good works, until the end came ; and the aged woman, who had borne so long the burden and heat of the day, and the man who had been smitten down in the very youth and noontide of his strength, lay quietly side by side beneath the chancel stones of St. Leodegarius.

Tressa did not need even then to seek a fresh home. A small annuity, left her by Mrs. Thoresby, and the little sum inherited from her aunt, together with what she could earn by giving music-lessons, enabled her to continue the unpretending establishment in the quadrangle ; and there she would most likely have stayed, treading in the footprints of the good old lady whose life had hallowed the place, had not Romilly returned from Melbourne, and made a fresh change in a life which was henceforth to be lived not for itself but for others, and in such living to find its true content.

She must live with them at the Court-house, he said. And truly, though the days were brighter now than in the former Mrs. Macnorman's time, still there needed some fresh influence to brighten, and smooth, and harmonise the conditions of life there. Poor little Lucy, stifled under a load of strings, buttons, puddings, and domestic avocations, had little leisure or ability left for that pretty broidery work of grace and fancy which makes such a comely finish to the otherwise unadorned web of daily household duty. She did her best to manage her servants, and rule her three romping boys, and please her somewhat despotic, though exceedingly popular and entertaining husband; but when that was done, she could no further go. A great deal of the freshness and sparkle of life had been pressed out of her. She could not effervesce now, as in the days of her maidenhood, with pretty brightness, and innocent, unthinking glee. She could not charm her husband with

her beauty, for that was of the delicate wind-flower type, which fades almost as soon as the dew has dried from it; and the sweetness hiding beneath its faded remains was not of a sort to charm a man who wanted colour, depth, piquancy, richness, and variety. She could not dazzle him with her wit, either, or chain him, when her beauty had gone, by the bright intelligence which neither wear nor tear of time can dim. She could only love him, and submit to him, and be true to him, and mend his linen and attend to his home comforts, and sit at his fireside a most meek, gentle, devoted little wife. Romilly wanted something more than that, and Lucy knew he wanted something more, and the knowledge pressed like a dead, immoveable weight upon her, making her often dull and spiritless in the presence of the husband who had chosen her for her sweet vivacity and pleasant overflow of unfailing brightness.

So Tressa came to them. Both were thank-

ful to have her. She gave out of her mind to one, out of her heart to the other, out of her sympathy to both. As Romilly thought, she was a sort of spiritual carbonate of soda in the stale, rather hard small beer of their daily domestic life, making it palatable, if not absolutely exhilarating. Romilly had been obliged to own to himself lately that the small beer *was* rather hard. It had been flat a long time, but now hardness had set in. Possibly the next stage would be vinegar, and then he should begin to wish the cask could be returned. Of course it never could be returned. He must keep drawing off a certain quantity of its contents every day, stale, flat, hard or sour though they might be, and drink his portion as patiently as though it had been of the finest October; but still that unpleasant fact did not keep him from thinking how refreshing a draught of something stronger, more heady would be, and even occasionally regretting--of course

only when the small beer was *very* small indeed—that when the more generous draught was within his reach, he had put it from him, and taken instead this pale, watery beverage, which, though in the highest degree safe, was, at the same time, intensely common-place; and which, if it never pushed its imbiber into the wild vagaries of intoxication, never raised him into that happy state of exaltation under whose influence a man can both do and dare to the very limits of his being.

Therefore Tressa, being neither too flat nor too heady, was a most welcome addition to life at the old Court-house. And in truth she was a wholesome woman to occupy that most difficult of all positions—neutral ground between husband and wife who have ceased to find in each other true content and perfectness. She was just faulty enough to be pleasant, and just weak enough to make people love her for her weakness—splendidly

heroic women are often a great nuisance in a house—and, which was better than either, she was unselfish enough to do numberless little acts of kindness which no one praised her for; whilst she left the great acts to those who too often let the little ones slip through their fingers. And seeing that Romilly and Lucy were now in a condition which rendered carbonate of soda indispensable to the fast deteriorating small beer of their daily intercourse, such an article could not have been supplied to them in a better form than Tressa Dovercourt's bright, peaceful, healthy influence.

For that four years in the wilderness, after Martin Thoresby's going away, had chastened but not pressed the sweetness out of her nature. During that long lonely waiting-time in the little cottage at Stowness, she had learned many things, amongst others to unlearn what Mr. Bateson's teaching had once forced her to accept as truth. She had made

a terrible mistake on the threshold of her life. Like the soldiers who pressed to that splendid Balaklava charge, she had followed a misinterpreted call, and it had led her to danger and to death. It was a grand thing to do, but the doing of it was fatal nevertheless; and no praise that heaven or earth might give could bring back the life-blood with which those heights of victory had been carried. In her young ignorant enthusiasm of religion she had asked for some sacrifice to offer, for some straight, narrow path to be pointed out whose very difficulty should be its own assurance of safety. Both had been granted; the sacrifice had been offered, the path trodden, and too late she learned that the offering of the one and the treading of the other had been alike done at the bidding of a fanatic devotion, which degraded the God of love into a selfish tyrant, jealous of the sweet human love which Himself had given, looking with satisfaction on

His children's tears, as with bleeding feet and joy-emptied hearts they took their solitary way across the wilderness in which His pity suffered no more flowers of hope to bloom for them.

It is a noble thing to kindle in the ardour of young faith an altar of sacrifice, whose flame lights up the darkness of the soul's night and makes that darkness beautiful. It is a nobler thing to turn from that flaming altar, its victim slain, and come down companionless, with emptied arms and broken heart, through the gloom which will surely gather when the first glow of enthusiasm has died away. But, when clearer light and larger reason have showed that the sacrifice was a needless one, the awful holocaust in vain, still to go calmly, trustfully on, through all the loneliness of the homeward path, neither murmuring nor upbraiding, this is the noblest thing of all; and this is what, through her four years in the wilderness, Tressa had

to do, none knowing, not even those who knew her best, how the brave little heart was labouring, and the sad soul weeping its bitter tears in secret.

Then came Martin's return, and with it the day upon which no night could ever gather. All was over, then, the waiting and the weariness and the pain. With him, dead but so faithful still, came back not the joy,—that could never quite spring up again,—but the beauty and the brightness and the sweet content of life. When Mr. Macnorman's death gave her to Mrs. Thoresby's protection and the old Aston-Royal life again, people who knew what a dreary task had been measured out to her in that lonely cottage by the sea, wondered how she could look so peaceful and pleasant and good-tempered. They wondered still more that year after year as it went on took so little freshness from her cheek, so little brightness from her eyes. They did not know that a woman whose treasure is safely gar-

nered up for ever in heaven, has a little sanctuary in her own heart which keeps her always young. Women of the world who have done well for themselves, men of the world whose lives have neither nobleness nor truth, may talk jeeringly of such an "old maid;" but she has within herself a possession of peace which they cannot touch; and if bitterness, that fatal scar of most wounded lives, writes its tale on any face, it is not the face of the woman who, having once faithfully loved, and seen her loved one pass from her into that world where no change comes, waits patiently at the gates of home and hope, until they are opened and she enters them for evermore. Such a woman may no more be the pet and idol of society. She lacks, she must ever lack, that foam and spray of happiness which play so beautifully upon the surface of successful lives. That deep sea of thought and feeling beneath which so much lies buried, may never toss itself again into the curling waves

of jest and merriment. Enough if it broods in untroubled rest above its treasures, silent, calm, until the final restitution of all things.

Such women, and they are to be found here and there in else dreary and uncomforted homes, are doing a work which few praise and fewer still reward, but which brings its own guerdon in that peace which passeth understanding. Such have no need to talk of woman's mission, or strive after woman's rights, theirs being the faithful doing of duty which brings into the heart a content grandly superior to all fancied rights, and sweetly independent of either place or power which such rights can bring. To this content Tressa Dovercourt had won, won to it through loss and strife and peril. And so quietly henceforth she did her work in the world, and so meekly bore herself therein, that even those who, knowing not what wisdom decreed it, what self-denial accepted it, mocked at her discrowned estate, could but own it more noble than many a one upon which the full-

round diadem of success is placed, and allow that she who bore it had the true royalty which, orbed and sceptred here or not, shall, sooner or later, come to its coronation-day in God's great palace of truth.

So Tressa was at home at the old Court-house once more, its sunshine and its joy.

CHAPTER III.

“ I DECLARE, dear Mrs. Macnorman, I never was so set fast about anything in my life. I’ve hunted through the etiquette book from beginning to end, but it don’t say anything about it, as I can find out. Van Brooten says, go in for it at once, and don’t stand upon etiquette. We can give them as good a dinner as anyone in Aston-Royal, and we’ve as much right to do it, but I always like to begin fair with fresh people. Who gave you your first dinner-party at Melbourne, Mrs. Macnorman ?”

It was Mrs. Van Brooten who expressed her social difficulties in the above somewhat blustering fashion, during a morning call upon Romilly’s wife ; and the difficulty had reference

to an entertainment of unusual extravagance, wherewith Mr. and Mrs. Decameron were to be welcomed into the circle of Van Brooten respectability. The fat, fair and rosy representative of mercantile magnificence had been asking herself and her friends ever since the Decameron mansion was taken, and the Decameron carpets laid down, and the Decameron establishment set in order, who ought to be the first to ask the Decamérons themselves to dinner, and take the lead in the series of festivities which should herald the rise of so much splendour upon the Aston-Royal firmament. In questions which pertained only to salmon, turtle, and champagne, Mrs. Van Brooten was quite at home, a full purse and a good French cook could set those questions straight in no time; but when matters of precedence and ceremony had to be determined, the good lady was compelled to have recourse to her Manual of Etiquette, Good breeding, and Manners, having no family traditions to depend upon, and no experience in the

bewildering uncertanties of social caste and position.

“Mrs. Macnorman, who *did* ask you first out there in Melbourne? It’s a savage sort of place, I daresay, being so far off, but still if you *could* remember, it would be a little guide. If I thought Mr. Bardon Limpsie ought to do it, I would wait; or, if your husband thinks they ought to be asked to the Court-house first——”

Lucy shrugged her shoulders. If there was one thing she dreaded more than another—poor little woman!—it was a state dinner. She never knew what to talk about; and, try to pass it off as she might, the soup and the fish and the rest of the things *would* lie like a weight upon her. She never felt right until they were all done with, one after the other; and then of course, as Romilly told her afterwards, it was too late to feel right.

“I believe,” she said, “it was a Mr. Somebody, a member of the Legislative Assembly, who

asked us first, when we had been there about a month, perhaps. I really forget his name, but I'm sure he was a member of the Assembly. That is the same, you know, as belonging to the House of Commons here,—at least, I think so, but Romilly says I never understand properly about things."

"Oh! then, that sets it all right," and Mrs. Van Brooten plumped herself ever so much farther back into the soft cushions of her easy-chair, with a gesture of infinite relief. "I don't mean, of course, about your never understanding things, which was rather a rude speech of Mr. Macnorman's—only he *does* say funny things sometimes—but about the member of the concern, whatever you call it, asking you to dinner. I'm quite clear about it now. Van Brooten must do it. I'll tell him so as soon as ever I go home. You see, the other member for Aston-Royal is off somewhere for his health, and his wife with him, so they can't be expected to do anything, and it sets it all straight for

us to be the first to do the thing handsomely. I declare it's quite a load off my mind. There's nothing I like better than setting a lot of people down to a real good dinner, only I get hold of the right handle about time, and who to ask to meet them, and that sort of thing. Do you think they'll turn out very grand?"

"I really don't know," said Lucy, plodding patiently away with the button-holes of a holland pinafore. Mrs. Brooten dropped in so often now, that all ceremony was laid aside between the two ladies. "Romilly generally finds out everything about new people; but, you know, he is out of town now, and will be until after the Decamerons come. But everybody says they are very rich."

"Yes, a regular old nabob—I mean Mr. Decameron—yellow, and ugly, and pompous, and positively no end of money, and awfully tyrannical with people who have to do anything for him. I hear a little about him from Mrs. Grant; you know, Grant is the architect for their new

place, and he said Decameron used to send his orders down just as if the whole lot of them had nothing to do but fetch and carry for him."

"Perhaps he kept slaves," suggested Mrs. Macnorman, who was always ready to make the best of everything and everybody.

"Perhaps he did," said Mrs. Van Brooten, "and he wants to keep them here too; but he'll find out that the Aston-Royal people don't see it in that light exactly. You wouldn't believe the stories I've heard Mrs. Grant tell about his sending up for Grant two or three times a week at Brighton, to show him patterns of decorations and things that had been ordered from abroad, and I don't know where. Of course, he treated him sumptuously enough when he got there, gave him the best of wine, and plenty of it, too; but still a man in Grant's position don't like to be tossed backwards and forwards like a dog in a blanket, though there *is* a good dinner at the end of the toss. The

Decamerons ought to have plenty of money, if they mean to go on in that way."

"Don't you think," said Lucy, "if they are so very grand, we had better let the county people call first? The county people do call sometimes, you know."

"The county people, indeed!" and up went the Van Brooten head, ringlets, lace bonnet, bird of Paradise feather, and everything—"county people, indeed!—poor as church mice. Gooseberry champagne, vinegar claret, and a block of salmon as big as a good-sized snuff-box. Do you think I'd give way to the county people when it comes to a dinner-party for a fresh resident? Nothing of the sort. I shall call upon them as soon as they make their appearance at church; and now that I know that James is the proper party to do it, I shall ask them to as good a dinner as was ever sat down to in Aston-Royal. James has the money to do it with, and it shall be done handsomely. I suppose you'll call too?"

“I suppose so,” and Lucy sighed. “Most likely Romilly will wish me to be friendly. You know he has rather a fancy for foreign people.”

“Yes, I *do* know. I was afraid once it was going to be rather too much of a fancy. I daresay you remember what I mean, my dear, just before you were engaged, when he took us all so much by surprise by going off to Melbourne in such a hurry. I really did think it was going to be a case with that Miss Dolfen, and it was quite a relief to me, though of course a great inconvenience, when she disappeared, with nothing but a note on the dressing-room table. Those foreign people don't do for English home life. They're all very well to look at, and set about like ornaments in your drawing-room, for the gentlemen to gather round; but when it comes to marrying, I always say stick to your own country, unless you want a regular coal-barge of a woman like Mrs. Bardon Limpsie, and then you can go to Hol-

land for her. Shall you ask them to dinner too?"

"If Romilly says I must. But dinners are such a trouble to me. I'm sure to have one of my bad headaches, and I don't like to make a fuss about it; and then he thinks I'm stupid, or won't try to talk; and you know it's very hard to keep up and smile, and look pleasant, when your head feels as if it was going to split all the time Oh! Mrs. Van Brooten, I am sure I was never meant to be the mistress of a family."

Mrs. Van Brooten laughed that jolly, good-natured laugh of hers, which made the bird of Paradise shake his plumes in quite a facetious manner.

"And you're not, my dear. Romilly Macnorman's wife is never the mistress of anything, not even her own will. But then, you know, it's a great deal better to be married, even if you *do* have to knock under a little to your husband—which I'm thankful to say

I never do to mine, and never did from the beginning, and never mean to do. You know one can't always have things *just*——”

“Oh! no, of course. I wasn't complaining a bit, I'm sure,” said Lucy, with a little touch of wifely pride. “Romilly is just as good as ever he can be. I wouldn't like him to be different, for the world. I shouldn't care to be married at all, if it wasn't some one that I could obey. But I wasn't cut out for society. I like to stay at home and take care of the children; and Romilly calls me a little goose for it, but I don't care, so long as I can please him.”

“And very good of you, I'm sure, my dear. Only, as I say to James, that's a rule that ought to work both ways. However, you know, I *am* very fond of society, and if James wanted a dinner-party every night, it would be all right for me, so long as he gave me plenty of money to make a respectable set-out. I should hate to give dinners if anybody

else in the town gave them better. But, as I was going to say, only you stopped me, it's a great deal better for a woman to be married, even if things don't turn out just as you expected. Because, after all, what is a woman if she isn't married? I was saying so to Miss Arbiton the other day, and she shut me up directly—at least, she thought she did—by asking me what a woman is if she *is* married. Miss Arbiton says she's nothing but goods and chattels, in the sight of the law. Such nonsense! Miss Arbiton would have been glad enough to be goods and chattels herself, any time this last twenty years, if anyone had asked her. I always said she had her eye on being Mrs. Macnorman, number two, after Mr. Romilly's mother—poor thing!—dropped off. I can't bear people that are always trying to put you down because you're a little bit better off than themselves. However, I'd rather be goods and chattels, if it came to that, than belong to nobody. Now there's Miss Dover-

court, I *do* wonder nobody ever married her!"

"And so do I," said Lucy, innocently. "But I shouldn't like her to marry anyone now. I don't know what we should do without her."

"Oh! you needn't be afraid. She won't go off now. She has 'old maid' written in her face, as plain as can be. I can always see that in a woman's face when it's there. I can't make out, though, why in the world that girl never did get settled. I quite made up my mind one time that she and your poor brother Martin would have made a match of it; and then, perhaps, poor dear young man, he would have taken to that farm at Aston-Vernay, and been a useful substantial man now, instead of being washed out of life in that uncomfortable way. I always say being drowned is such an unsatisfactory way of coming to your end. Poor things! I'm sure there ought to have been something in it. I remember as

well as can be, coming here to call on Mrs. Macnorman the day after Christmas day, ten years ago, in this very same room, only it wasn't so nicely furnished; but Mrs. Macnorman was a woman who never took much pride in her furniture; and your brother and Miss Dovercourt were set together in that window, where Mr. Romilly has had the beautiful stained glass put in; and if ever two people seemed as if they belonged to each other, those did. I said to James when I went home, that's a match, see if it isn't. And James he looked knowing—he can look very knowing sometimes—and said he fancied Mr. Macnorman had other fish to fry. You know young Limpsie had begun to come about the house just at that time, and of course he was a splendid match, though I don't mean any disrespect to your brother, poor dear fellow, only money is money, and Mr. Macnorman was always a man that thought a deal about it."

A wistful half sad smile stole over Lucy's

face as Mrs. Van Brooten brought back that happy Christmas-tide, ten years ago. For the memory of it was so fresh still in her loving, faithful little heart. She remembered, as if it had been but yesterday, that eventful party at the old Court-house; Bertha Dolfen, crimson, scornful and stately; the long game at chess; the dreary half hour when she stood alone in the oriel window; the walk across the quadrangle with Romilly; their quiet hand-clasp under the portals of the south corridor; the question asked and answered which gave them to each other for always. She had been so happy then. It seemed as if, loving Romilly and being loved by him, the years as they came and went could bring her nothing but joy. She loved him now as much as ever; he loved her too, and was always kind and gentle to her, and yet—and yet—

Lucy looked across to her face in the mirror over the quaint, old-fashioned mantelpiece. Ten years ago, more than ten years ago, she

had looked across to it as she sat, a maiden guest in the house where she now dwelt as mistress, wife, and mother; and looking, she had smiled to find herself so fair. The smile was for Romilly's dear sake. She only prized her beauty because it won tender words from him. There was not much left of it now. The rose and lily bloom, which he used to praise so much, had faded from cheek and forehead; the sparkle had died out of her blue eyes, the dimples from her once soft rounded chin. She looked across now, to the weary face of an anxious, toiling house-mother. How should Romilly, whose taste in beauty was so rare, love such a face as that? And what else had she to hold him—wit, grace, vivacity, intelligence? No. She could only love him and be true to him, and kiss the very ground he walked upon. That was all.

Lucy heaved a deep sigh, a very deep sigh, almost a sob. Mrs. Van Brooten thought it was for her poor dear brother, of course, who had been washed up drowned on the shores of

Stowness bay. With a good position, and a handsome home, and a popular husband, and a well-filled purse, and three rosy romping boys, what had Mrs. Macnorman to sigh for on her own account?

“Yes,” she replied, in answer to the sigh, “it was a sad thing, a very sad thing. I do wish your poor brother and Miss Dovercourt could have made a match of it, and then they might both of them have been jogging along as comfortably as possible at Aston-Vernay, and coming over here now and then when there was a concert, or a dinner-party, or anything of that sort. It really is so much better for girls to marry. When a girl is once married, she knows where she is and what she is; but when she doesn’t get off, she has to take up first with one position and then with another, just as they hand out for her. Poor Miss Dovercourt, you see how she gets tumbled about, first here at the Court-house, in her poor aunt’s time; and then to Stowness, where she must have had a terrible

time of it, by all accounts. Of course you didn't hear about it, being out of the country all the time, but I assure you, my dear, if you could only trust what people said——”

And Mrs. Van Brooten nodded her head emphatically, and so did the bird of Paradise, as if they both of them knew, well enough, that if you could only trust what people said—which of course you never can—Tressa Dovercourt had some very black memories connected with that little cottage at Stowness.

“And then back here again to your dear old grandma, to take care of her, and nurse her up, until the poor old lady dropped off; and then another upset to come and live with you, and help to look after the children, and all that sort of thing, Why, you know, Mrs. Macnorman, if she had married your brother, or young Limpsie, it would have been worlds better for her; besides having a position, and going into company

on her own account, and having the sort of respect paid to her which a maiden lady never has. Oh! dear, it was a great mistake!"

"She doesn't have to give dinner-parties, though," said Lucy; "and that's a comfort. Do you know what sort of a woman Mrs. Decameron is? Romilly will expect me to call, and I do so dread strangers."

"Oh! Grant says she's a very fine-looking woman—a great deal younger than her husband; married him for his money, no doubt. Widower, I daresay, with grown-up sons, disposed of somewhere out of the way. Grant says she gets her own way in everything—old man's darling, you know, my dear. They do say there are no simpletons like old simpletons; but when June marries December in that way, December ought to give in a little, to make the bargain square. She twists him round her finger like a piece of cotton-wool. It's all her doing, Grant says, about De-

cameron coming to Aston-Royal; and if she had wanted him to go to Iceland and settle there, he'd have done it to please her. I can twist James a good deal, but I can't twist him like that. Just fancy Mr. Macnorman, my dear, going to live anywhere because you wanted him to. Wouldn't it be ridiculous to think of it?"

Lucy was obliged to confess that it would.

"Yes; I never saw Romilly Macnorinan put himself out of his own way to please any one, except that Miss Dolfen, that lived governess with me; and I believe he did now and then take pains to please her; but then she was the sort of girl that does twist a man round her finger—he can't help himself. I always said it was the best thing in the world for you, my dear, when she went away. But I must be going now. James wants me to go and see after a new dress. He says there is a lovely thing in one of the High Street shops—a pea-green moiré.

with a black lace flounce; and he wants me to get it for this dinner, when it comes off. Pea-green suits me, you know; and James always makes such an awful fuss over my appearance. I tell him it's absurd of him."

And Mrs. Van Brooten looked across to the mirror, herself, with a much more complacent air than poor Lucy had been able to assume. Married life had not washed the colour out of her face to any appreciable extent.

"Of course I shan't fix the day until I know when Mr. Romilly is coming back. I must have you both, because he always makes a dinner pass off successfully. I always say he's a very extravagant man to ask, for he keeps the gentlemen so long over their wine afterwards, telling his stories and that sort of thing; but I don't care so long as the thing goes off well, which it's sure to do if he helps it on. When will he be at home, do you think?"

"I don't know, exactly. He says when he

has done his business, he shall come and take me and the children and Tressa to the sea-side for a fortnight—he thinks perhaps it would do my headaches good. He says they are beginning to turn my hair grey; and then he shall be so ashamed of me. I should like to keep that nice, if it was only to please him. So we shall not be settled at home again for a month, at the very least.”

“Oh! well, never mind, that will be soon enough. You know I must call, and she must call back again, before a dinner can come off. I shall have you two and Tressa of course. I always say Tressa does credit to a room; she looks so lady-like, and doesn’t take up the gentlemen’s attention too much. And then I shall ask the clergyman and his wife; they’re rather stuck-up, of course, but very stylish; and Mr. and Mrs. Bardon Limpsie; no more than that, I think. Reginald will be at home then from Rugby, and he’ll do to take Miss Dovercourt in to dinner. Of course

he's only a lad; but I'm never that careful about single ladies as I am when I have married people to do with, and it doesn't seem worth asking a gentleman on purpose for her. There will be a few people in the evening, and perhaps a dance; but that depends. However, you know, I shall send you a proper invitation when the time comes, just as if I had never said anything to you about it."

And away bustled Mrs. Van Brooten, good-natured, happy soul, or rather body, to look after her new pea-green moiré with the black lace flounce, and to write down her bill of fare for the dinner which was to welcome Mr. and Mrs. Decameron, of nobody knew where, into the circle of Aston-Royal society.

CHAPTER IV.

THE rich old nabob and his wife came to their splendid villa at Aston-Royal. Everybody who was respectable enough came to call upon them. Then came the return calls, then the invitations, of which Mrs. Van Brooten's was, as she intended it to be, the first. Mr. and Mrs. Macnorman returned from their sea-side trip just in time to be present at the entertainment, of which due notice had already been given. Poor little Lucy felt rather nervous about it. Nearly eleven years of married life, and an amount of prosperity which would have turned the heads of most women, had not given her assurance enough to take for granted her wel-

come in any society upon which she chose to bestow the honour of her presence. So, although she was habited in a very expensive black velvet dress, which Romilly, hearing of the pea-green moiré, had ordered expressly for this occasion, and though her laces were of the finest; and her jewels, though few, of the clearest water, and though, when she presented herself for his inspection, her husband had given her an unusually affectionate kiss, and said that if she could only win back the roses to her cheeks and the sunlight to her eyes, and get out a few of the silver streaks from her soft curls, she might yet be the prettiest lady at the dinner-table, let people say what they would of this wonderful Mrs. Decameron, —still she could not shake off a certain feeling of restraint and discomfort as, leaning on Romilly's arm, she entered Mrs. Van Brooten's superb drawing-room, to be presented to the illustrious stranger, who, if report said true, could put on a new dress every day

in the year, and match them all with jewels of barbaric splendour, to say nothing of that almost palace-like place on the London Road, the like of which, for luxury and extravagance, had never before been seen in Aston-Royal. Lucy always took people at their own estimate of themselves, or at the estimate which public opinion had prepared for them ; and having already received a considerable course of snubbing from her positive, though on the whole affectionate partner, for her want of presence and importance in social life, she was generally now in the attitude of a mental curtsy to the world at large, asking it to forgive her for not being bright and pretty and stylish and fashionable enough ; asking it to forgive her for being only a humble, loving, dutiful, conscientious little wife.

But Mr. and Mrs. Decameron were not in the Van Brooten drawing-room when the Court-house party entered it. Like some other gentlemen who think themselves, on the strength

of the houses and lands which they have gotten in possession, guests who cannot be paid too dearly for at any price, Mr. Decameron always made a point of keeping dinner waiting for him. Mrs. Decameron rather liked doing the same thing. She had an ineffable satisfaction in sailing into a drawing-room when its occupants had been waiting for her half-an-hour at the very least. Her splendid appearance at the host's right hand was more than enough to compensate for the most pitiful raggedness of the over-boiled salmon; and what was soup which had lost its youthful aroma, compared with the brilliance of the smiles which made people of the slightest good taste perfectly oblivious of its shortcomings? If Mrs. Van Brooten could ever have looked cross, she would have done so now. What lady would not, who has to shower sunny glances upon her waiting guests, when she knows that every moment so spent is ruining the transient glory of a fifty-guinea dinner? But Mrs. Van Brooten never did look cross.

She could not, even if she tried. But she made up for it by going to each of the ladies in turn, and whispering to her, with a smile of the broadest good-nature, that she expected the fish would look like an Irish beggar when it came to table; and as for the game, which she had ordered all the way from Abrochtie at no end of expense, it would be as dry as a mummy if the Decameron carriage did not turn up presently.

“So glad to see you, Mrs. Macnorman,” she said, as she bustled up out of her yellow brocade chair, and shook hands with Lucy, and whispered privately into her ear, “Love of a dress—and so sweetly made, too; never saw one look better in my life.” And then she bestowed a vigorous greeting on Tressa, and set her down by the clergyman’s side, and sent Romilly across to talk politics with Mr. Van Brooten.

“So glad to see you. Mr. and Mrs. Decameron haven’t come yet. I tell everybody

the dinner won't have a bit of goodness left in it, but it isn't my fault, for I'm sure it was good enough to begin with. You've got one of your nasty headaches, haven't you, my dear? Saw it as soon as ever you came in."

Of course poor Lucy had. She always did have one when Romilly wanted her to look and behave her best. The fair little brow upon which Time had already begun to delve his parallels, was throbbing at a painful rate, and her cheeks were beginning to burn with anything but beauty's flush.

"Very sorry, thought it was something of that sort; eyes heavy, you know, almost as if you had been crying. I always say it's such a nuisance, and you won't be able to enjoy your dinner a bit. Dear me! I *am* sorry. But I'll tell the clergyman to take you in, and give him a hint about it. He's an awfully quiet man, so you need not put yourself out of the way. I hope you enjoyed yourself at the sea-side, Mr. Mac-norman?"

Mr. Macnorman said that he had enjoyed himself. At least he had enjoyed the boating and the sailing, if he had not enjoyed himself.

“Ah, that is so like you, Mr. Macnorman. I never did see a man like you for turning things upside down. Melbourne hasn't done you any good; you're just as mischievous as ever. Do you know, I do think I have got a surprise for you to-night, if you never had one in your life before.”

“It will be the first I have had for a long time, Mrs. Van Brooten,” said Romilly, coolly. “Things go on in a general way so very much as I expect them to go on, that anything out of the ordinary course will be quite a pleasant relief.”

“Ah, yes! of course it is all very fine to talk in that way. I daresay you would look as cool as a cucumber if you found that you had come all the way from Melbourne to shake hands with an old friend from the tropics. But perhaps it

might not be such a very pleasant surprise, to meet an old friend from the tropics, Mr. Romilly."

"A surprise prepared for me by Mrs. Van Brooten could never be anything than pleasant," said Romilly, bowing politely to his elaborate hostess, over a dainty album which had opened by chance upon the portrait of Miss Dolfen; and then he strolled leisurely away to resume his conversation with Mr. Van Brooten.

What in the name of fortune could the good lady mean? he wondered. Was that swarthy, scarlet-lipped West Indian girl,—a girl no longer now though, but a woman, and at a woman's most perilous age,—coming back after all to her governing in Aston-Royal? Had she had another thunderstorm with her guardians, and had she written to Mrs. Van Brooten to look out for a situation for her? Mrs. Van Brooten had always behaved very kindly to her, and would doubtless be very glad to do a good turn for her, now, by recommending her to

some family who would offer the poor girl a comfortable home and a small salary, in return for her lady-like appearance, and knowledge of French and Spanish. And if she really was coming back to Aston-Royal, should he be glad or should he be sorry?

Romilly dived into a deep exposition of his views with respect to the Irish question; and then, whilst Mr. Van Brooten was stating his at considerable length, came back to his own private meditations.

Should he be glad or should he be sorry? Should he take up the acquaintance again, or should he let it drop. Certainly, if Miss Dolfen appeared disposed to carry out the spirit of her behaviour to him, as they had parted ten years and a half ago in the hall of the old Court-house, he, careless and indifferent, she with such a white face of scorn, the less they saw of each other the better. But if she were disposed to let bygones be bygones——

Another hasty little dip into the Irish ques-

tion with excellent Mr. Van Brooten, who of course, as the Liberal member for Aston-Royal, could not be listened to with anything but respect, and then back to the tropics.

If she were disposed to let bygones be bygones, he should be quite glad for Lucy to call upon her—that is, of course, if she was in a respectable family—and ask her to the house, and show her any little attention which a young woman, alone and friendless, in a great town, might reasonably expect from people who had once known and taken notice of her. And she certainly was a splendid creature. He did not quite know what Lucy might say to it, but it would make a very agreeable variety in his life to spend an evening with her now and then.

Another vigorous appeal from Mr. Van Brooten. *Did* Mr. Macnorman think that the wrongs of the oppressed Irish tenantry would be redressed; and *was* not the plan which he, Mr. Van Brooten, had just been setting forth, exactly of a nature to meet such wrongs?

Romilly said they ought to be redressed, by all means, and the plan which Mr. Van Brooten set forth,—though he had not taken in a single word of it,—was the very thing required to meet the case. In fact nothing could be better, more concise, more sensible.

It certainly would be a most agreeable variety to spend an evening with her now and then, just by way of a little froth on the top of the small beer. And of course, as he was a family man, there could be no nonsense of any kind between them now. He knew his place, and doubtless she would know hers, so that, even if they had not had that exceedingly unpleasant conversation on the Court-house parapet, she would have too much good sense to go a step out of her proper place. Lucy should call upon her when she came, and so should Tressa, and they would give her the benefit of a little pleasant society now and then, or take her to a concert occasionally. There could be no harm in that, at any rate.

“There could not be a better arrangement of the matter, Mr. Van Brooten. As you say, we must give and take. Each side must be willing to relinquish old grudges, and to commence a new career of kindness and good-will. You have expressed my sentiments exactly. One party has been unscrupulous, the other lax. A middle course must now be adopted, which shall remedy license on the one hand, and——”

“Mr. and Mrs. Decameron.”

Romilly was too much absorbed in his own meditations just at that moment to feel much curiosity in the advent of the strangers. The advent of some one else, to whom Mrs. Van Brooten’s mysterious hints had seemed to point, had absorbed for the time all other interests. He scarcely turned to see the new-comers, who were just being presented to the clergyman and his wife. Mr. Van Brooten stepped forward.

“Mr. Macnorman—Mr. Decameron.”

A little, wizened old man, with a very yellow face, and a very beaked nose, and very long

teeth, and a very brown wig, which contrasted oddly enough with his white whiskers, held out his hand, and with a pompous, rickety air, made some commonplace remark about the pleasure it gave him to meet Mr. Macnorman. Then pea-green Mrs. Van Brooten bustled forward; the old gentleman stepped aside; Romilly, abstracted, preoccupied, just caught sight, behind his hostess's trailing draperies, of a great wave of satin, in colour like the golden heart of a primrose, emerging from it a splendid, queenly head, with coils of black hair massed upon a low, swarthy brow, and red-ripe pomegranate lips, and indolent, heavy-lidded eyes, which scarce took the trouble to lift themselves, or give more than one single fiery gleam through their dense lashes, as Mrs. Van Brooten, all fuss and animation, and brimming over with delight, partly, perhaps, that the turbot and salmon would not need to boil into more beggarly raggedness, and partly because she was intro-

ducing two such very old and pleasant friends, said,

“Mr. Macnorman—Mrs. Decameron.”

A string of jewels sparkled as the white bosom heaved them slightly; a round arm gleaming with golden fetters moved outward from a cloud of black lace; a gloved hand was slowly extended to him; a smile, that had in it something of the siren and the fiend, parted the scarlet lips, and showed the pearly teeth. Leisurely, imperially, as the velvet-robed wax figures in Madame Tussaud's turn their diademed heads, that swarthy brow, with its coils of black hair, was raised.

“I am very glad to see you again, Mr. Macnorman.”

Mr. Macnorman bowed. He, too, was very glad to see Mrs. Decameron again. “It was quite an unexpected surprise—a very pleasant one,” he added, with another bow to radiant Mrs. Van Brooten, who stood by, watching to see how the introduction would be received.

But of course, as she said, Mrs. Decameron had the advantage, for she knew well enough who Mr. Macnorman was, but Mr. Macnorman could not in the least be expected to know who this Mrs. Decameron was, although her name had been on almost every respectable pair of lips in Aston-Royal, since that splendid new villa on the London road had been refitted and furnished. Miss Dolfen's old flame, however, was quite equal to the occasion. He always did seem to be equal to any occasion, whatever it might be. If anyone were to touch his elbow, and say, "Mr. Macnorman—Her Most Gracious Majesty the Queen," he would drop on one knee, most likely, Mrs. Van Brooten thought, and touch that august lady's hand as though he had gone through the ceremony fifty times before. It was really wonderful, the presence of mind of some people. She had almost hoped there would have been quite a little scene when Romilly Macnorman and Bertha Dolfen met again, after their ten years' separation.

"I heard of your return from Melbourne," Mrs. Decameron said, turning the sunset glow of her smile upon him again for a moment, "almost as soon as we landed in England. Theodore,"—and here some more jewels flashed into the light, as their wearer turned slowly round to her wizened, yellow-faced little husband—"Theodore, this is another of my old friends. You know," she added, with indolent *nonchalance*, "I told you you would find plenty of my old friends in Aston-Royal, and I shall expect you to appropriate them all."

Thus appealed to, the little gentleman came forward again, and in the same pompous, rickety fashion as before, was beginning to express the great pleasure it afforded him to extend the right hand of friendship to anyone who possessed the honour of Mrs. Decameron's esteem.

Bertha cut him short in the midst of his oration.

"That will do, thank you," she said, haugh-

tilly. "Mr. Macnorman will take everything you can say for granted. There is not the slightest occasion for patronising him. We know each other well enough, do we not, Mr. Romilly?"

And, as she spoke his name, she rolled her brown eyes once more upon him, their defiant glance just touched into that tenderness which made Bertha Decameron not less dangerous than Bertha Dolfen to all those upon whom she chose to exert her fascination. But Romilly only bowed very courteously again over the white-gloved hand which was lingering needlessly long in his unanswering grasp, and in words which held not a single touch of memoried regret, acknowledged his remembrance of the old acquaintance.

Bertha noticed the slight, almost imperceptible emphasis which he laid upon that last word, seeming, as it did, to put aside her own assumption of a warmer regard; but she only smiled again, and then turned carelessly from

him to enter into conversation with the square-built Mrs. Bardon Limpsie.

Dinner was announced at last. Romilly's place chanced to be nearly opposite to Mrs. Decameron, but she took very little notice of him. Mr. Van Brooten's attentions, and those of the clergyman who sat on her right, seemed entirely to satisfy her. Her indifference rather irritated Romilly. If she had attempted to attract his notice, to assume that dominion over him which he knew well enough she once possessed, he would have been cool, guarded, collected, amused rather than otherwise, or perhaps more flattered than amused; for Romilly was still very fond of power, and nothing pleased him more than the acknowledgment of it by those whom he met in society. But this woman, whom he had once conquered and enslaved, whom he could once wound with a tone, a look, a word, upon whose warm, passionate nature he could have played, ten years ago, as upon a harp whose strings

gave forth sweetness or discord in obedience to his touch, owned no power of his now. Nay, with a certain imperial loftiness, which, galling though it might be to his self-esteem, was not without a touch of interest, she assumed to herself the position of superiority, and evidently took it for granted that he would bow down to her as in the first days of their intercourse. That stirred Romilly's pride. He could not so easily take the second place where once he had been supreme. True, to move the heart and influence the life of Bertha Decameron, as he had once moved the heart and influenced the life of Bertha Dolfen, was no longer honourable nor expedient; but, at the same time, to be dislodged from his vantage ground, to be an object of indifference where he had once been an object of admiration, was more than he could tolerate; and Romilly Macnorman determined that such an abnormal state of things should not be allowed to continue an hour longer than was absolutely necessary.

The dinner which, as Mrs. Van Brooten privately confided to housekeeperly little Lucy, *had* weighed rather heavily upon her mind, passed off very pleasantly. Mr. Decameron, though a queer-looking old fellow, was quite prepared to be agreeable, chatted about anything and everything that came up, and seemed to be enjoying himself in a manner which promised well for future intimacy. Mrs. Decameron was gracious, though not brilliant. No doubt it was too much trouble to be brilliant. Even when occupying a very different position in the family, ten years ago, she had never put herself out of the way for the entertainment of other people; and, therefore, it was not likely that, being, as she now was, the wife of a millionaire, and the mistress of one of the most splendid houses in Aston-Royal, she should be more than passively agreeable. But whatever lack of sprightliness there might be about Mrs. Decameron, Mr. Macnorman quite made up for

it by his own conversation, which was even more than usually brilliant—so much so, that it kept the guests, if not in roars of laughter, which, under the circumstances, would scarcely have been appropriate, at least up to the very boiling point of interest, so that there were no unpleasant gaps and breaks and awful chasms of silence, when everybody wished that everybody else would say something, but nobody could think of anything to say. And then, though the soup and the salmon were not everything that could have been wished, owing to Mr. Decameron's want of punctuality, all the other courses were perfection—the iced plum-pudding a very miracle of scorching cold; the jellies, creams and confections, such as even Gunter himself could not have surpassed; and as for the wines, Mrs. Van Brooten could always repose with the most absolute satisfaction on her husband's cellar—it was so thoroughly up to the mark in every respect. On the

whole, she did not think that when Mr. and Mrs. Decameron had completed their first campaign of entertainments in Aston-Royal, they would be able to review a better dinner, better cooked, better served, better supplied, and better garnished, both as to viands and company, than that to which she had just had the pleasure of seeing them do justice.

And so, as Mrs. Van Brooten gave the signal for the ladies to rise, she felt like a woman who has done her duty to society, and done it successfully too.

CHAPTER V.

IF Mrs. Decameron had been only passively agreeable under the influence of the gentlemen's presence, it was scarcely to be expected that she should be more than passively disagreeable when withdrawn from that influence. The company of ladies was always a nuisance to her; and unless she had some private purposes of her own to serve, she rarely made even the slightest attempt to disguise the weariness which their uninteresting chit-chat produced. Besides, she knew that, in a general way, women were rather afraid of her, and she despised them accordingly, as she despised every one who feared

her. The only way to deal with Bertha Decameron was to take her at a disadvantage, to spring upon her in the dark, as one wild animal springs upon another, and so conquer her before she knew she was being attacked.

Lounging in a great easy chair, over which her amber draperies floated like a gorgeous western cloud, and now and then toying with a feather fan that hung by a golden clasp to her arm, she allowed the clergyman's wife to say a few words to her, replying occasionally with an absent, mechanical smile, or a careless look of acknowledgment. Poor little Mrs. Macnorman, flushed, weary, suffering, spiritless, was being good-naturedly petted and coddled by Mrs. Van Brooten and matter-of-fact Mrs. Limpsie, who plied her with vinaigrettes, and related by turns their own experience in headaches, as well as the experiences of other people who had been perfect martyrs to the same distressing com-

plaint. The conversation grew smaller by degrees, until at last it quite wore itself out. The clergyman's wife yawned behind her lace pocket-handkerchief. Mrs. Limpsie's head swayed gently to one side, as though under the potent spells of slumber. Mrs. Van Brooten began to calculate mentally how much the dinner had cost altogether, and what she should do with the fragments that remained. Bertha Decameron closed her great brown eyes, only opening them from time to time with an angry gleam, as an unusually long peal of merriment, sounding across the hall, betokened that Mr. Macnorman's wit was at its best and brightest to-night. He, at any rate, she thought, did not seem dispirited by the withdrawal of the ladies; neither did he seem in haste to avail himself of any brightness which their presence might produce.

It was an immense relief to the drawing-room party when the gentlemen appeared. Romilly did not, however, seek to sun himself

in the more immediate presence of his tropical friend, but placed himself in the neighbourhood of Mrs. Van Brooten, who was still engaged with Lucy on the headache question.

“Now, then, *isn't* it a surprise for you?” said Romilly’s hostess, as she drew aside her new dress to make room for him on the couch.

“It is indeed,” he replied coolly. “She has developed into a most magnificent woman ; such a queenly presence. I really never saw anything to surpass it. Headache better, little one?”

And he leaned forward to lay his hand with a slight caressing touch upon Lucy’s shoulder—Lucy who had appeared, when she came to show herself to him four hours ago, in her quiet matronly black velvet, as if she would be the most lady-like, faultlessly-attired woman at Mrs. Van Brooten’s dinner-party, but who looked now so exceedingly ordinary and

washed-out, scarcely equal, in fact, to humdrum Mrs. Bardon Limpsie.

“Headache better, little one?”

“No, thank you,” said Lucy, “not a bit. It won’t be any better now until we go home.”

“Would you like me to take you home now?” he asked very kindly; “and then I can come back again.”

“No, I had better stay. I think I can keep up to the end. If I feel like breaking down, I can just slip away; but I don’t think I shall, if I keep quiet.”

Romilly was slightly disappointed. He did not like to own it to himself, but still he would have been better pleased if Lucy’s headache had been bad enough to oblige her to go home at once. He could have shown off more effectively, flashed into greater brilliance if she had been out of the way. It did not seem quite consistent to be supplying so much social champagne to other

people, whilst his own wife, who ought to have been the first to feel the effects of it, was crumpled up like a bit of worn-out blotting-paper in a corner of the room. And besides, he wanted to go and have a talk with Mrs. Decameron; and he felt that if Lucy could look right down into his heart and know all that was going on there, she would not have liked him to have a talk with her at all. He resumed the conversation with Mrs. Van Brooten.

“Yes, a magnificent woman. Decameron was telling me just now in the dining-room that after she had seen the advertisement in the *Times* about Moore’s place on the London Road, she never let him rest until he sent some one down to look after it, and make arrangements for the purchase. Queer fancy, wasn’t it, to want to come back here? If I had been her I would have gone to the Land’s End first, because, you know, people are sure to remind her of her for-

mer position. Between ourselves, Mrs. Van Brooten, I think she rules her husband with a rod of iron."

"Those sorts of women always do," replied Mrs. Van Brooten, not without a little bit of spite, because, before Mrs. Decameron came to Aston-Royal, her husband had been the most prosperous, her house the most richly furnished, her servants the most numerous, her dresses the most costly, in the place, and now she found herself, as she expressed it, nowhere. "When you hear of a fine-looking girl marrying a man forty years older than herself, you may generally know what it means. As I said to your wife once before, when June marries December, December ought to give in a little to make the bargain square. It's a capital thing for her, though. James says the old man can't be worth less than ten or twelve thousand a year, by the way they go on. I daresay she would marry him thinking

he would drop off before long; but he won't do anything of the sort. Those wizened old men with beaked noses never think of such a thing as dying, especially when people want them to. She must be rather an expensive wife for him. Those jewels of hers are simply magnificent."

Romilly stroked his moustache in silence. He was not thinking about Mrs. Decameron's jewels, though, but about what Mrs. Decameron's husband had said to him an hour ago.

"My wife was determined, positively *determined*, that we should come to Aston-Royal. She said the only pleasant part of her life—of course before I married her—had been spent there. And, you know, I always do just as she wishes. I let her hold the reins in everything."

"I don't call her stuck-up, though," continued Mrs. Van Brooten, "for all she's got such a wonderful lift in the world. Her manners are pretty much the same as they used to be. She draws all the gentlemen after her, you see, as

usual, although she has tied herself to a stick, as one may say, for the rest of her life. And the old fellow don't seem to mind it, either. I suppose if he did, it wouldn't make much difference. I declare I'm positively deserted in my own drawing-room. No, I'm not, though. Here's Mr. Limpsie coming my way, but you're going away as soon as he comes. You've been wanting to be off this ten minutes past, I know."

"Yes, yes, it's all very fine," added the resplendent pea-green lady, as Romilly, in duty bound, deprecated such an accusation of fickleness, "I can see it as plain as a pikestaff, you want to go and have a talk with Madam Yellow-satin-and-diamonds. Mrs. Macnorman," and she turned to Lucy, "you must look after this entertaining husband of yours, or Mrs. Decameron will be snapping him up again; you know they used to be old friends, ever so long ago. If you don't mind what you are about, Mr. Romilly, I shall report you to the nabob."

“Whenever you please, Mrs. Van Brooten. I daresay he knows all about me already,” said Romilly, giving, however, a keen glance towards his wife, as he strolled away in the direction of the sunset cloud. But Lucy was leaning back on the sofa very nearly asleep, decidedly the best state she could have been in, under the circumstances.

Romilly knew too well what he was about, to appear over-anxious for a chat with his old favourite. He halted, first by one lady, then by another, for the coming guests were beginning to arrive, took another hasty dip into the Irish question with Mr. Van Brooten, made a churchy remark or two to the clergyman, complimented Tressa on the pretty way in which her hair was done, and stopped for full three minutes to inquire after Mrs. Limpsie’s children, before he stationed himself within convenient speaking distance of the guest of the evening, who was receiving, indolently as usual, the homage of half the gentlemen in the room.

The scene, the time, the surroundings, were strangely like those of eleven years ago, when first those two, like, yet conflicting natures, first met to try their strength upon each other. Only Bertha Decameron had added to Bertha Dolfen's girlish defiance a certain massive, almost over-ripe dignity. Her figure was more heavily sculptured; her head, with its coronal of shining coils, was carried with a more imperial pride; her eyes, those wonderful gleaming eyes, looked out from beneath their black lashes with more absolute assurance of command. Her full pomegranate lips, when they smiled, did it with more luxurious fulness. There was even a more splendid earthliness about her, the earthliness which comes of outward wealth and plenty. As the wife of Theodore Decameron, she had thriven well upon her good fortune, and did credit to it.

As her host of admirers fell apart, Romilly came forward, with no fine words of flattery this time. Indeed he left it for her to give the first

word of welcome if welcome it was to be.

"I think our gentlemen enjoyed their after-dinner conversation," she said, turning her rich Cleopatra face upon him. "You lingered long. Was it the wine or the wit that charmed you?"

"Neither; and we did not linger so long as you think. We strolled out to cool ourselves in the moonlight. You know I was always fond of moonlight, and so were you."

It was rather a daring spring, but Romilly reached his mark, and from that vantage ground felt himself master of the situation. A faint scarlet colour, quickly flushing up and then as quickly fading, beneath the olive of Bertha's cheek, betrayed that she remembered.

"Yes. I had a foolish fancy for the moonlight once, but it is quite gone now. I have had more affinity with the sunlight since then. Mrs. Macnorman does not seem quite herself this evening. Does she generally show to so little advantage in company?"

Bertha was as skilful in planting her own

arrows, as in hiding the wounds which those aimed at herself might cause. She had watched Romilly and Lucy very closely during the interminable courses of that stately dinner, and she had found out that, whatever strong points Mr. Macnorman might possess in society, his wife was not one of them. She was too much afraid of displeasing her husband to do herself justice. She dare not venture an opinion, lest it should be contrary to his own. She had no self-assertion, no self-confidence, none of the ease and *aplomb* which sits so easily upon some successful women. She could not shine in society; she could not even look pretty in it any more; for ten years of married life, and plague of servants and worry of children, and, as Bertha divined keenly enough, ineffectual effort to maintain a love which she had never been strong enough to command, had changed the once piquant, charming, almost dangerous little Lucy Thoresby into as tame a drudge

of a woman as any man need wish alternately to snub, tyrannize over, or be ashamed of. In half an hour Mrs. Decameron knew all about it. She had seen the anxious wife feebly brighten up and attempt to look all right when her husband spoke to her in that careless yet kindly way a little while ago. She had marked his look of annoyance when at the dinner-table she failed to reply with ready bright intelligence to any remark addressed to her; and she knew well enough where the arrow would hit when she said, with such apparent solicitude—

“Does Mrs. Macnorman *generally* show to so little advantage in company?”

Romilly winced for a moment, but soon recovered his composure and his readiness too, for he said—

“Mrs. Macnorman does not care for society. You know she is very modest and retiring. She prefers to be sought rather than to seek.”

And as he said this Romilly looked into Bertha Dolfen's face with a clear, bold gaze, which said as plainly as possible—

“You remember that night on the parapet when you came from the moonlight into the gloom? If not, think of it now, and take care.”

Again the quick scarlet flush, which betrayed how the arrow had reached its mark. It was long since Bertha Decameron had met with any one who was so well able to defend himself, to give back blow for blow, whilst preserving the cool indifference which was far more galling than any display of temper or irritability could have been. It was no use being defiant now. It was no use attempting any more sneers, under cover of politeness. One single word of unmaidenly boldness, ten years ago, had given this man a mastery over her, which she could not shake off. Here was no meek slave, to sit at her feet and do her bidding, as other

men, as her rich, yellow-faced old husband did it. Here, if her woman's beauty ruled, her woman's nature must submit. There was but one way of conquest—to accept her position, and stir his chivalry by that acceptance.

“Mr. Macnorman,” she said, in a low, sweet voice. The other gentlemen had dropped off one by one, and she and Romilly were alone together in that little inner drawing-room—“Mr. Macnorman, as you are strong be gentle. I was very foolish once; but it is not well to remember all the past.”

That was enough. Again her arrow, barbed with a kiss instead of a sneer, had reached its mark, and given a wound more dangerous for that it was so sweet. Romilly wanted no more from her than this acknowledgment of his power. The trembling tone, the almost beseeching look, the half regretful smile, brought back what she needed from him. He was a generous master to those who gave

in after a well-fought battle; he was only tyrannical to those who never fought at all.

“Shall we put the past, then, entirely away?” he asked, in tones as low as her own.

“Oh, no; it was so beautiful—it was so dear.” And there was a pause. “I was so delighted to see you again,” she resumed, in her usual indifferent company voice, as Mr. Decameron came hobbling towards them. “Theodore, Mr. and Mrs. Macnorman have been so kind as to say they intend calling upon us very soon.”

“I shall be most happy;” and Mr. Decameron’s little black eyes twinkled through a wine-mist as he held out a somewhat shaky hand to his wife’s old friend. “The carriage waits, my dear.”

She took his arm, and making her adieux to Mr. and Mrs. Van Brooten, swept superbly through the crowded drawing-room, the people

instinctively falling aside for her to pass, as though she had been an empress. As she neared the door, she turned for a moment. Romilly's eyes were upon her. Again that half unconscious and quickly-checked motion of her hand—now so richly jewelled and wearing a wife's ring upon it—to her lips, again that lurking, siren smile, again that bold bright look from the heavy-lidded brown eyes. Then she was gone.

Romilly and Lucy went home together immediately after. And so ended Mrs. Van Broo-ten's dinner party.

CHAPTER VI.

BERTHA DOLFEN had hurried away from Aston-Royal eleven years before, homeless, friendless, dependent ; leaving none behind her to mourn for her departure, going forth to none who would welcome her return. She went with no dower but that dark beauty, that brave, turbulent spirit, that southern love of ease and fulness, that warm, passionate nature which hitherto had brought her nothing but bitterness. She came back rich, prosperous, well cared for ; to rule where once she had been ruled, to place that yoke on the necks of others beneath which her own, so proud and stiff, had often bent, to live in splendour as a wife and mistress, absolute in authority, lofty in position, plenteous

in wealth, where once she had dwelt an underling, comforted by none of these things. She went out empty, she came back full. She took out with her the mean belongings of poverty, she brought back the sumptuous trappings of prosperity. She went a defiant, impetuous, passionate girl; she returned a hard, calculating, worldly woman. Also she returned a childless, unloving wife.

Unloving, but not unloved; and in that lay the secret of her hardness. When Bertha Dolfen, wounded, proud, and desperate, uprooted herself from her comfortable home with Mrs. Van Brooten, and rushed forth, carrying the arrow of Romilly Macnorman's rebuke in her heart, there was yet hope of her that with all her faults she might become a noble woman. That sting of pain might have done for her what it had done for many another wounded and suffering one, led her through misery to content. Over strife, over humiliation, over the bitter consciousness of failure, she might have

won to a standing-place well worth the winning, and looked back at last from the height of worthy womanhood, over the turbulent rebellion, the pride and passion past, of those early years. But Bertha was a Sybarite at heart. Her whole nature craved for wealth, ease, luxury. There was yet in her a far-off touch of nobleness to know that these things were not all, that something lay apart from them, better, more lasting still; but soul had not mastery enough over sense, to make her follow the guiding of a hand which pointed to a path of privation and self-denial.

Unless that hand had been Romilly Macnorman's. Selfish as she was, she could have given up much for him. He was the master of her life. He was the only one who had ever made her fear, struggle, resist, and then submit to his superior power. He had conquered her imperious nature, and because of that very conquering, she loved him. For, under all Bertha Dolfen's haughty defiance, there was the true

woman's instinct of obedience to some one stronger than herself. She scorned those whom she could sway by the mere force of her large lustrous beauty or the dominance of her will ; but the heart of her submitted with the weakness of a child to such a superior as Romilly Macnorman, who ruled her not by moral beauty—that had no charm for her,—nor yet by intellect, nor principle, nor by the contact of bright purity with her own angry, passion-stained wilfulness ; but simply by coolness, assurance, audacity, by facing her boldly with neither flattery nor fawning, and taking from her by command what she would never have given by request.

And she was woman enough, too, to feel, down to the very quick, the wound which the man she loved had given her, when they two stood together in the moonlight on that old moss-grown parapet. She could not bear it, she could not face him again with the memory of it rankling at her heart. She thought in that

hour of his weakness she had had sufficient fascination over him to do and dare whatever she pleased ; but he had glided out from under her spell, he had despised and refused that so precious gift of her love, which, with overboldness, she had placed at his disposal. She had put into his hand herself the weapon whose wound could never be healed. She could not endure the humiliation. Smarting, resentful, indignant, the very selfishness of her love its own punishment, she hasted away from the scene of her defeat, anywhere, anywhere, so only her cool and smiling conqueror could not sting her any more with his courteous indifference.

She went back to Cuba. The salary which she had just before received from Mrs. Van Brooten was enough for her expenses out. Her guardian gave her a home for a few months, until she could meet with another situation ; for teaching was her only means of gaining a living, and her haughty spirit made a permanent residence with any of her friends

a simple impossibility. For three years she struggled on under a yoke not always so easy as that of Mrs. Van Brooten had been; and then deliverance came in the shape of Mr. Decameron, a wealthy West Indian planter, whose wife had lately died. Bertha's beauty charmed him, and he offered his splendid position and insignificant self in exchange for it. The bargain was a tempting one. Her indolent, sensuous, self-indulgent nature craved the ease which wealth alone could give. Her vanity, quickened by the homage it had already received, needed the stimulus which an old man's idolatry offered. Her imperious will, her longing for power, for influence, for something to rule over, was lured by the prospect which Mr. Decameron's abject submission offered. So she gave him her beauty, and he gave her his gold. They were married. But on the altar before which she stood in bridal pomp and splendour, to ratify the treaty of exchange, Bertha laid a much costlier offering than the

beauty which had brought her there. She laid whatever of honour, truth, worth, and honesty was possible to her; and left it there, to be taken back again no more, until the shrivelled, dried-up soul and body to which she was selling herself should drop into the grave, and so make the bargain void.

Henceforth her life was a lie, and she knew it. Had she brought an empty, though unloving heart to her rich old husband, she might in time have learned to tolerate herself, though fallen for ever from a woman's best estate. But with the love of another fast rooted within her, with Romilly Macnorman's image painted on the walls of her memory, his face perpetually looking upon her from the cherished past, she gave not only beauty but truth itself in exchange for the splendid position which for the future would be her only treasure. Her husband married her for love, and he kept on loving her with a foolish, idolatrous, earthly love, which made her despise him for its very

fondness. And that love unprized, unreturned, fixed the last seal of hopelessness on any possible nobility which might have remained for her. Nothing makes a woman so thoroughly hard and selfish as the daily receiving of homage and affection which she can neither care for nor return. Bertha took everything, she gave back nothing. It was a fatal exchange. There is hope, there is sweetness, there is even infinite beauty in the life of a woman, however unloved she be, who, giving, asks for nothing in return, but in that very giving finds her daily food. There is no hope, there is no sweetness, there is no beauty, there is nothing but the ever spreading canker of moral degradation for the woman who takes to herself a love which she does not care for, who accepts day by day, month by month, year by year, a devotion which has no value for her, which she cannot return, which comes to her shorn of its loveliness, and stands a pauper knocking for ever unregarded at the

door of a heart which never opens to take it in.

So Bertha Decameron, the luxurious, petted wife of the West Indian planter, paid the price of her lie. She became a worldly, selfish woman. She lived a hollow, unlighted life; a life into which no beam of tenderness, human or divine, ever came to brighten or to warm it, nothing but idolatry which she despised, and a slavish submission which only moved her to contempt. They lived for seven long years, she and her rich old husband, amongst the negroes and orange groves of Cuba. Then a wild longing seized her to come back to England. She hungered with the hunger of her whole locked-up, passionate heart, for a sight of the place where her best, her only true life had been lived. She had kept up an occasional correspondence with Mrs. Van Brooten before her marriage, and English newspapers, some of them from Aston-Royal, reached her from time to time. In one of them she read

Romilly Macnorman's name, and gathered from the mention of it that he was again living in his native town. After that she never rested until she had persuaded Mr. Decameron, who obeyed her as a spaniel obeys its mistress, to dispose of his property in Cuba, place an agent upon the plantation there, and come to settle in England. They landed in November, and went to Brighton for the winter. There Bertha saw in the *Times* the announcement of Mr. Moore's death, and shortly after an advertisement for the sale of his beautiful house on the London Road, close to that of Mr. Van Brooten. She expressed her desire that the place should be purchased for their occasional residence. Mr. Decameron obeyed; he never dared to do anything else now, his wife kept him in such perfect submission. A gentleman was sent down to look at the place, report upon it, and make arrangements for its transfer into Mr. Decameron's hands. Mr. Grant, a recent resident

in Aston-Royal, was chosen as architect for the alterations. But Mrs. Decameron, in her consultations with him, said nothing about her former knowledge of the town, for she wished to burst suddenly upon her friends there, and astonish them by her new magnificence.

Painters, paperers, decorators, were set to work. For six months Mr. Grant was running backwards and forwards between Brighton and Aston-Royal, to fulfil the behests and obey the commands of the planter's imperious lady, who allowed neither trifling nor parsimony in the carrying out of her plans. Moreover, she had her own purposes to serve in guesting Mr. Grant so sumptuously at the Marine Hotel, and sending him home to his gossiping little wife with such splendid accounts of the Decameron magnificence. For had he not named a Mrs. Van Brooten as one of his wife's friends, and would not anything that was said to Mrs. Van Brooten find its way to the old Court-house, and raise Romilly Macnorman's curiosity concern-

ing the possessor of so much wealth? When the decorators had put their finishing touches to the house, extravagant suites of furniture were sent down from London, and all that taste and money could do was done to make the palace of upholstery into a home; and towards the end of the summer, whilst Lucy and her husband were wiling away a few tedious weeks at the seaside, Bertha Dolfen, who had left Aston-Royal eleven years before, wounded, suffering, warm-hearted, houseless, came back to it a superb woman of the world, mistress of a splendid position, a magnificent home, a doting husband and a hungry heart. And, perhaps, as side by side with her parchment-faced slave-lord she rolled up in her luxurious carriage to the door of her new mansion, where liveried lackeys waited on the steps to do her bidding, and as from its silken curtained windows she looked across over the sleepy river to the many-gabled Court-house, with its ivied oriels and moss-grown parapet, the thought might tarry

in her poor starved soul, that, after all, like Naomi, she had gone forth full, and was returning empty.

CHAPTER VII.

BUT if Mrs. Decameron, with her husband, and her servants, and her jewels, and her carriages, felt that she was returning empty, she was too proud to let anyone else know it; and she was far too wise also to expose herself to the stings of gossip by assuming airs of superiority towards those inhabitants of Aston-Royal in whose homes she had once been received as an equal or as an inferior. Accordingly, when Mrs. Van Brooten called upon her, she at once, without any hesitation or awkwardness, accepted the fact of their former relations, explained her abrupt departure eleven years ago as arising from the intolerable quietness of the place, and accounted for never mentioning to

Mr. Grant her former residence in Aston-Royal by a very natural desire to surprise her old friends there by coming down upon them without any previous announcement of her intentions. She did so enjoy giving her friends a little surprise, she said, as, with an air of superb indifference, she sauntered in all her massive beauty across the gilded and mirrored drawing-room of Aston-Royal House, to shake hands with Mrs. Van Brooten, and assure that astonished, flurried, gasping, and almost breathless lady, how exceedingly delighted she was to see her again, and take up the pleasant old friendship which had been so unexpectedly interrupted eleven years ago.

And then, after giving the merchant's lady time to recover herself a little, and fan back a trifling amount of self-possession, she chatted on quietly about her marriage and her husband, and her West-Indian home, and the circumstances—Mr. Decameron's health, she said—which had induced them to come to England.

And from that to her six months of Aston-Royal life, which she talked over as calmly as though no tumult of passion and pride had vexed it for her, as though through it she had not passed into the brightest glory and deepest shame of her life. Mrs. Van Brooten used to be so kind to her, she said, so very much kinder than people often are to their governesses; and Reginald and Leopold—she supposed they would be almost young men now—though rather unruly sometimes, had been, on the whole, so very affectionate, that really she had quite enjoyed her six months at Aston Lodge, and should no doubt have stayed much longer, if the air of the place had not suddenly begun to stifle her, so that she felt she must do something desperate to get out of it at once. Mrs. Van Brooten would doubtless remember that she used to be rather a desperate sort of girl, and took strange freaks into her head sometimes.

And those were such pleasant little evenings

—Mrs. Decameron lounged listlessly back upon her velvet cushions as she said it—such pleasant little evenings, when the children had gone to bed, and Mr. Romilly Macnorman looked in for whist, or chess, or croquet. She supposed he did not often look in for whist or chess or croquet now, being married and settled, which, of course, made a great difference to a man. That was a sad affair about poor Mr. Macnorman, the father. She was so much obliged to Mrs. Van Brooten for sending her the papers with full accounts. A very sad affair indeed; but it would pass over, like other sad affairs; and most likely young Mr. Romilly, when he came back from Melbourne, would not find it affect his position in the least. He was just the sort of young man to get over an affair of that kind. Would Mrs. Van Brooten like to walk into the conservatory? The flowers were rather pretty, though the gardeners had not been able to arrange them all yet; and the air of the drawing-room

was rather stifling—she really could not get these stupid English servants to understand about keeping the windows open.

Of course Mrs. Van Brooten was delighted to walk into the conservatory—indeed, she would have been delighted to walk anywhere with Mrs. Decameron, whose manners were so perfectly charming. Yes, that was a very sad affair about poor Mr. Macnorman, but nothing was ever heard of it now, and Romilly might be considered to hold even a better position in the place than his father had ever done. He might have a better position still, if Mrs. Romilly, poor woman! was not so exceedingly delicate, and retiring, and averse to society, and all that sort of thing. Did Mrs. Decameron remember Mrs. Romilly, poor woman?

Yes, Mrs. Decameron *did* remember Mrs. Romilly, poor woman!—a nice, pretty, fair-faced, blue-eyed little fairy. Young Macnorman used to pay her a good deal of attention when she came across to the Court-house; but Mrs.

Decameron never thought it would come to anything. And so he had married her after all, and she was delicate and retiring and disappointed now, was she?

Yes, Mrs. Van Brooten said, disappointed—she thought that expressed it exactly. If Mrs. Decameron had any recollection of Mrs. Romilly at all, she would remember that she was very modest and unassuming, quite the wrong sort of woman for a man like young Macnorman, who was brilliant and fond of society, and dining out, and all that sort of thing. Mrs. Romilly, poor woman, was not cut out for society at all—was happiest amongst babies and buttons and puddings—could not do herself credit in company; in fact, never ought to stir from her own fire-side. Mrs. Van Brooten said she did not pretend to be a clever woman herself, but she could generally tell when people were likely to suit each other; and for her own part she believed that a husband and wife were

never more unequally matched than young Macnorman and Mrs. Romilly, poor woman ! Did not Mrs. Decameron think the same ? because of course she had seen a good deal of them when she lived in Aston-Royal, and visited at the Court-house.

Mrs. Decameron, toying with the crimson blossoms of an immense cactus, smiled with languid indifference, and said most likely Mrs. Van Brootten was quite correct in her opinion ; but really so many things had happened since her intercourse with young Mr. Macnorman and Lucy Thoresby, that she could not charge her memory with particulars. She *did* remember, however, that the poor girl was very sweet and amiable, and that they had never got on very well together, because, for her own part, she could not bear those colourless, washed-out people. But still she should be quite glad to be friendly with the Court-house people now, if it were only for the sake of old associations, which were always

so pleasant, so very pleasant. Yes, she thought if Mrs. Macnorman called at Aston-Royal House, she should not object to renew the intimacy.

And then the two ladies told each other for the twentieth time how delighted they were to meet again, and how they hoped to be very friendly, very friendly indeed; and Mrs. Van Brooten complimented Mrs. Decameron on her good looks—really no one could believe that she was eleven years older than when they last met; and she congratulated her upon her beautiful home and her sumptuous furniture and her devoted husband, and the general magnificence of her position; and wound up by reiterating her oft-repeated hope that they should see a great deal of each other; though of course Aston Lodge could not compete with Mr. Decameron's new residence in point of splendour, and all that sort of thing.

Mrs. Decameron looked indolently round upon her cactus and orange blossoms, her perfumed

fountain, her golden-winged canary birds flitting about amongst the passion-flower and myrtle, and past them to the ormolu and buhl and brocade of her gilded drawing-room, as if "all that sort of thing" was of very slight importance. But still it pleased Mr. Decameron to get them together for her. She had only to express a wish, and he never rested until it was gratified. But then of course he had nothing else to do with his money. It made all the difference when people had a quantity of children to provide for, and a limited salary, and other difficulties of that sort. Poverty was such a nuisance, was it not? And then the two ladies kissed each other and exchanged vows of everlasting friendship, and parted; Mrs. Van Brooten going home in a great state of jubilation and complacency, to make arrangements for such a dinner-party as should sufficiently express her delight at an old acquaintance thus unexpectedly renewed.

So the dinner took place, as chronicled before, and left its mark—a somewhat deep mark—on Mr. Van Brooten's purse, as well as upon the memories of two people who met in his drawing-room, calmly, courteously, but with the ghosts of many other meetings, some pleasant, some quite otherwise, rising between them as they clasped hands and greeted each other with such well-bred self-possession.

Romilly went home with his meek, faded little wife, "poor woman!" and, as he smoked his cigar up and down the yew-tree walk, he tried to picture to himself, just for the sake of amusement, nothing more, how different life would have been if fate had decreed the passing of it with a woman like Bertha Decameron, magnificent, defiant, anything but meek; so haughty even in the submission which she was nevertheless compelled to give; so responsive to every touch, whether of indifference, or scorn, or silent authority, which he laid upon her. He could not keep back a certain linger-

ing regret that fate had settled all that for him now, that his lot was cast beyond changing or improving. For there was that in Romilly Macnorman which wearied of overmuch submission; and the daily reverent offering to him of a whole-hearted love, in return for which he gave one not whole-hearted at all, had done its work for him, too, in making him somewhat hard and selfish.

There was this difference, however, between the conditions of Romilly's life and those of Bertha Decameron's. In his better moods—and they came to him sometimes—his heart turned towards Lucy with a love that was touched into tenderness and respect for the quiet usefulness of her life. He knew that he did not give her so much as she gave him, but what he did give came from the loftier part of his nature; and in so far as that had the ascendant, his wife received more generously from him. To be true to himself was to be true to her. The curse of Bertha Decameron's life was

that she owned no loyalty at all to him who yet was her chosen lord. She had set over herself a king who could not govern her, whose love for her was only love of her beauty, not love of her spirit ; a king who, instead of reigning, sank to be her slave and puppet, and for whom, whilst she accepted his service, she could feel nothing but disdain. Romilly's life so far was not a lie, though it was not all the truth. He did not give to Lucy all that he had to give, but what he kept from her he gave to no one else. He could look into her patient, trustful, honest eyes, if not with equal honesty, at least with the moderate self-respect of a man who guesses no lurking demon of self-reproach within his heart, who is disloyal to no allegiance and false to no oath. At least that had been true of him until Mrs. Van Brooten's mysterious hints had sent his thoughts away again to an almost forgotten past, and raised up for him the dim remem-

brance of a glamour which he once thought had faded away for ever.

But now he and Bertha had met again, and that part of him which Lucy did not reach, never had reached, never could reach, had found its own in her. Where Lucy's gentleness wearied, Bertha's defiance animated. Where Lucy's humility owned him lord and master, Bertha's stronger nature rose up in antagonism, daring him to conquer it, and win the glorious triumph of victory. Lucy's submission was given without a struggle. Bertha's—and he had won it from her once,—was given after a conflict which made it ten times more precious. Who exults over a captive whose weapons have been laid down without a blow struck? Is there not a lingering touch of self-reproach in taking that for which no strife has been put forth, and is there not a thrill of pride in binding on the crown whose golden circlet has been so hard to win? Romilly was not a man to be enslaved by mere beauty. He was

too strong and cool, he thought, to put his neck under that yoke, or keep it there. But defiance fascinated him; he could not rest until he had conquered that, seen it crouching at his feet, owning his power, yet ready to spring up again, bright, flashing, fearless as ever, as soon as the strong hand was removed.

And how beautiful she had looked in the splendid trappings of her wealth! Her rich ruby lustre was made for the setting which graced it now. With what imperial indifference she received the service of her yellow-faced old husband—lucky fellow to win and wear such a jewel,—and the flatteries of the brainless fops who crowded round her, eager to do anything for her, pick up her scented handkerchief, hold her bouquet, her gloves, her fan. And with what a magnificent affectation of disdain she turned her great brown eyes upon him to rebuke him for loitering so long away, and how soon it sparkled into the feminine jealousy, which shewed that she was her old self still,

spite of jewels and wealth and yellow-faced husband, and wedding ring on her large white hand. Yes, her old self still,—petulant, craving for attention, restless if she were not supreme, outwardly careless of preference, inwardly hungering for it as a wild creature for its prey. And then how panther-like she had crouched with all her savageness at his feet, when he but reminded her of the past! How the flash in her bold eyes had quivered into appeal when she felt herself in his power once more. Imperious to everyone else, she was tame enough to him; yet preserving in her very tameness that fine touch of throbbing resistance which defies even whilst it yields.

Why did she marry that man? Because she loved him? no. And why had she come back to Aston-Royal? What spell had brought her there again?

The Abbey clock struck eleven, it struck

twelve, it struck one ; and still Romilly Mac-norman walked up and down between the yew-trees, thinking, thinking, thinking.

CHAPTER VIII.

MEANWHILE poor little Lucy slept. Lucy whose light of life, gradually dimming and going down for the last three years, was not likely to be much brightened by the advent of Mrs. Decameron. Since their return to Aston-Royal, twelve months ago, and Romilly's reappearance in the society of which he was so popular an ornament before his removal to Melbourne, Lucy had felt sadly enough at times, that her influence over him, and power to please, were gradually diminishing. During the first years of their residence abroad, before the cares of a family, and the anxieties of life, and the painful effort to satisfy him, had quite taken away all her happy brightness,

he had been almost proud of her. Her quiet lady-like manners, and a certain air of good-breeding about her, had been enough to give her distinction in social circles more brilliant than cultivated; and if she could not gather round her a cluster of admirers, like some of her more noisy neighbours, she could at least, by her simple grace and elegance, do credit to her husband's taste, and, at all events, prevent him from being ashamed of her. But society in Aston-Royal was very different from what it had been in Melbourne, and even if Lucy could have kept her youthful grace and elegance, they would have done but little for her in procuring that distinction which Romilly would fain have seen achieved by his wife.

Lucy felt her short-comings, and mourned over, though she could not mend them. Besides, it was not only in society that she failed to meet her husband's needs. She could not enter into his life, nor keep step with him in the path which he had chosen for himself. She

had not the tact of gathering round her interesting and cultivated people, and she could not talk to him about his own pursuits with that ready brightness and sympathy which would have kept him from needing other company at home than hers. And sometimes, as she sat apart in some gay evening-party to which he insisted on her accompanying him, and listened to his brilliant sallies of wit, and saw how the conversation of intelligent women charmed him, because it brought out his own power to charm, there came into her sensitive, dutiful heart that cramp of pain which many a woman has to bear, who finds her love less prized than the wit of strangers.

Yet Lucy never complained. She took it for granted that the fault was all her own.

"You know, Tressa dear," she said, as the two sat chatting over their sewing, the day after Mrs. Van Brooten's dinner-party, and Lucy was comforting herself, as she often did, by opening out her little store of cares and re-

grets to Romilly's cousin, the strength, now, and stay and peace of the home. "You know, Tressa, I think it was very good of him to have married me, because I was so very different to the sort of girl he might have fallen in love with. Being such a favourite with everyone, and getting on well in the world, and flattered as he used to be, and asked out so much, he might have married almost anyone, with ever so much money, and bright and intelligent too, instead of picking up poor little me, who could do nothing but love him. But oh! he has been very kind. I don't think I'm half grateful enough for his being so kind. You know when Uncle Bernard died, and we both of us thought I should have had a lot of money, at least a good deal, because of poor dear Martin not wanting any, and I only got a thousand pounds, all the rest being left to Mattie, he wasn't a bit angry with me—he never scolded me at all, or made any disagreeableness about it."

“Why, my dear Lucy,” and Tressa could not help a smile at the feebleness of this illustration of Romilly’s high-mindedness, “do you think anyone who was half a man would have made any disagreeableness about it?”

“I don’t know, I’m sure; but I thought it was very good of him, and he said I needn’t cry about it, for he didn’t mind at all. But I wasn’t going to talk about that, only about his marrying me, when I was such a stupid little thing, and he was so fine and clever. You know I thought it would be all right at first because I loved him so much, and it seemed when I loved him so, I could not help but make him happy. But, Tressa, I begin to think that a man like Romilly wants a great deal more than for his wife just to love him. He wants her to talk to him and brighten him up, and say clever things, or at least to be able to understand and laugh when he says clever things, and I can’t; he always has to explain them to me, and then he says it spoils them, but

I can't help it. I'm sure I try very hard to keep up with him sometimes ; and when I know that he's very much interested in anything, I get books and read about it, but it all slips out somehow, and when I want to talk to him and let him see that I can be a little companionable, it gets mixed up together, and I make such a hash of it."

"But Romilly never does talk about anything much to you, except the children and that sort of thing."

"No, he doesn't now, but he used to until he found out I couldn't keep along with him, and then he gave over, and he only talks now when he goes out or somebody comes to see us. It's very stupid for him. I sometimes think I should have been kinder if I had let him marry some one else. Of course it would have been horribly miserable for me, but it might have been better for him. He said something as we came home last night, about that Mrs. Decameron being such a charming woman, and I am sure if

she is charming I can't be charming a bit. Oh ! Tressa darling, what a lot of mistakes we make before we find out what is the right thing to do."

Tressa tried to comfort the tearful little woman by telling her if she did her best, things would be sure to come right at last. There was always rest somewhere, she said, for those who, whilst they waited patiently for it, filled up the time by doing the duty which lay nearest to them. That led on to the next, and that again to another, until at last peace and stillness and content came.

But she knew the sadness which was wearing away so much sunshine out of Lucy's life ; and she knew too, that no amount of striving, no painful effort to please, could bring any nearer to each other the husband and wife, between whom—the one clever, bright, self-confident, successful ; the other, shrinking, timid, fearful—a great gulf was fixed, a gulf all the more hopeless because it was not fixed by any conscious fault

which either could overcome, but by the absolute diversity of natures which could never blend. Nearer association and larger experience of life, were showing her somewhat of the weakness and vanity which streaked the polished surface of her cousin Romilly's character, somewhat of the unconscious selfishness which ruled his conduct. She was not exactly learning to respect him more as she knew him better. The same nearer association and larger experience were revealing the sweet humility and dutifulness of Lucy's love; but Tressa knew, even as she felt and revered them, that these qualities could never touch or influence such a man as Romilly Macnorman had made himself in ten years of prosperity and popularity. Whilst he could have an unlimited amount of flattery and admiration from the society in which he moved, he was not likely to care very much for humility and duty, though he might be ready enough to avail himself of the sacrifices which both would cheerfully make for him.

“And oh! Tressa, dear,” Lucy began again, “he did frighten me so whilst we were at the sea-side; but I’ve never said anything about it, because he said it was only a castle in the air yet. He told me Mr. Mason, the senior partner, had been talking to him about establishing a branch concern out in the West Indies, and that he should very likely have to go and make arrangements for it. Isn’t it terrible? And you know I couldn’t go with him, because of the children. The climate wouldn’t suit them. Indeed, when he talked about it, he said that, if the plan came to anything, he should go first, just for a few months—a visit—nothing more than that, and that it would be much better for him to be alone. Just fancy me being left all that time!—because, although you are such a good, kind Tressa, still you are not like one’s own, *own* Romilly, after all; and it would be so miserable, never having him to hold on to and lean against. But I was asking him this morning, and he says he doesn’t think

he shall go now. Perhaps the affair will not come to anything, and Mr. Mason will not want a branch establishment."

An unquiet look passed over Tressa's face. One of those sudden intuitions which are like lightning flashes of truth just darted across her mental vision and away again. She could not shape it into a thought. It was gone in a moment. But it had lighted up what might be a dark, distressful future for the loving wife at her side. Lucy chatted on innocently as ever. It was such a relief to be able to open the flood-gates of confidence, and say all that was in her heart without fear of misunderstanding or rebuke.

"Oh! I *was* so glad when he told me this morning he did not think it would come to anything; because, though I know well enough I'm not everything he wants, yet I could not bear to have him go away; and the worst of it was that, when first he began to talk to me about it, he didn't seem to care so very much

himself—scarcely any more than if he had just been going into Scotland or somewhere for a week or two; and all the time I wanted to burst out crying, I felt so miserable. Only I don't like to cry now, for Romilly says it spoils my eyes, and they are dull enough already. Oh, Tressa!"

And Lucy sighed as, throwing her bit of sewing-work aside, she took hold of Tressa's two hands, and looked into that bright, still, quiet face over which the years as they passed wrote no story but of peace.

"Your eyes don't get dull a bit, and your cheeks don't look thin like mine. You always seem as if you were just getting ready for something very beautiful—as if you were waiting for something to happen. I don't mean impatient, you know, but as if you were quite sure of its coming, and had only to sit still and think happy thoughts about it."

"I *am* waiting for something beautiful, Lucy, and I know it will come."

“Oh, yes; you mean that you will go to heaven some day. I’m sure you deserve to go, too. Is that it?”

“Never mind. I suppose everything will be all right some day.”

“You said so once before. I wish the some day would not be so long coming, though. But I was going to tell you about Mrs. Decameron before I go to look after the children. You know when she came into the cloak-room last night, just before they went away, I was there too—Mrs. Van Brooten had just taken me in for a minute, to give me some tincture for my head-ache—and, oh! she did speak so nicely to me—I mean Mrs. Decameron did. I told her I was sorry I had not been able to call upon her yet, but we had only just returned from the sea-side, and I had had no time; and she said, oh! yes, Romilly had told her all about it, and promised that we would both of us go to see her; and she said it so pleasantly—as

differently as could be from the stately way she had behaved to me before; and she hoped we should be very friendly, very friendly indeed; and she said she did not mean to stand upon ceremony at all, but if I was busy with the children, and all that sort of thing, she should come in and see me herself some evening, without waiting for an invitation. Wasn't it nice? And you know I had been so awfully afraid of her. I almost felt as if I should faint when she came sailing into the drawing-room with that magnificent dress, and her jewels flashing, and I found out she was the same Bertha Dolfen we used to know eleven years ago. She was such an awful creature then, wasn't she?"

"Yes," said Tressa. "I didn't like her at all. And I don't like her now, either."

"No. I think I don't, too, because there is such a great deal of her that you can't make out. But I must have called upon her, anyhow, after Romilly had said he wished

it; and it is so much pleasanter for her to be nice and kind. Just fancy her actually offering to come in some evening in a quiet friendly way, and she such a grand lady now. I'm sure I never dare have asked her, because, though our home is very nice," and Lucy looked round with wifely pride on her pretty oak-furnished room, "it isn't anything like so splendid as hers—at least, Mrs. Van Brooten says so, and Mrs. Van Brooten has been to call once or twice. She says Mrs. Decameron is very nice, too. But isn't he an old fright?"

"Who?—Mr. Decameron?"

"Yes. He looks just like a piece of bad cheese; and I'm sure she doesn't love him. She scowls at him so when he begins to talk, and treats him as if he was her servant, instead of her husband. Just fancy my behaving to Romilly in that way!—wouldn't he crumple me up in no time? Mr. Decameron seems dreadfully afraid of vexing her, though.

I wonder if Romilly would be more afraid of vexing me if I stuck up for myself like that West Indian woman. It wouldn't be any use trying, though, for I couldn't do it."

"No, that you couldn't," said Tressa, laughing. "You had a great deal better keep just as you are—a dear, good, loving little wife. I'm sure you're a great deal happier than Mrs. Decameron, though Romilly doesn't knock under to you, as they call it."

"Perhaps I am. She isn't happy at all. I could see that directly. Isn't it funny that we should be so different? I wonder which is the best—to love some one very much, and be loved a little back again, as Romilly loves me, you know, because it's no use pretending not to see that he might love some one cleverer a great deal more; or to love somebody not at all, and have him love you a great deal."

"Ask Mrs. Decameron."

"I think I will, some day—that is, if she

fulfils her promise of being very friendly indeed. She was very polite to Romilly last night, though they used to spar and quarrel dreadfully when she lived with Mrs. Van Brooten. I believe they had had an upset of some sort when she went away in such a hurry; but he never told me about it. It will make it pleasanter for Romilly if she comes here sometimes. I like him to have society at home, and then he doesn't want to go so often to that tiresome club. He goes nearly every night now, you know."

And Lucy sighed again. She was going back into the old regretful track.

"I don't know how it is, Tressa, but I can't help wondering, since last night, whether Romilly would have been happier if he had married Mrs. Decameron. Of course she wouldn't have loved him half so much as I do; but perhaps that would have made him love her ever so much more. And I was thinking in the night, when I was so wretched and miserable with

that stupid headache, that if it would make him any happier, I should almost be glad to die, so that he might find some one better. I don't feel like that just now, because things look so different when you wake in a morning, and no headache; but still I have the thought there. Only, you know, if he did marry anyone else and she wasn't kind to Rommie, and Fred, and little Martin—oh! if anyone wasn't kind to little Martin, I should break through coffin and earth and stones and everything, and come back and take him away from her!”

“You wouldn't have to break through them,” said Tressa, a glorious smile flashing like dawn-light over her face. “Nothing so hard as they are.”

“No. They say—

‘Heaven's crystal bars shine faint between
The souls of child and mother.’

But I should think more about little Martin than either of the others, because he reminds me so of his uncle. Poor Martin! Oh, if he had not

died! And he was brought to you at the last, and you took care of him, and did everything for him. It was so pleasant to think that strangers did not find him and pull him about. But if he had lived perhaps you might have learned to love him. I always did think, Tressa darling, that he cared a great deal about you, and he would have been so good to you. Martin would have made anyone happy. And poor, dear grandma must have thought he loved you, or she would never have given you that old seal that you wear on your guard to keep for his sake. Martin prized that so very much. He used to say he would never part with it to anyone."

"Mrs Thoresby did not give it to me," said Tressa. "I took it."

"You *took* it! Oh! how funny!"

"Yes, when he was brought into the cottage at Stowness, and laid so cold and dead in the little parlour where you and I used to play when we were children. And old Margaret took off

his watch and chain and gave them to me, for Mrs. Thoresby. I remembered this seal. He used to wear it when he came to the Court-house, a long time ago. And he once showed me how to open it."

"Did he? I never could open it, myself; there is a spring somewhere. Let us open it now and see poor mamma's picture, and her hair. Martin said he should never open that, except to look at his mother and his wife."

Tressa took the old-fashioned jewel, and with reverent hand touched the spring. Lucy, kneeling by her side, bent over it, then started back. She knew the bright girl-face which laughed out from its golden frame, and the dark hair, Tressa's hair, twining round the dead mother's summer locks. She looked up and read the whole sweet, sad story in the quiet face, which neither age nor care had leave to sharpen.

"Until death us do part," she said thoughtfully. "But it has not parted you."

“No. It only gives us back to each other,” Tressa said, smiling.

“And this, then, is the something very beautiful, which you are getting ready for?”

“Yes.”

Lucy never said “poor Tressa” after that.

CHAPTER IX.

LUCY was quite right. Mrs. Decameron had been very "nice," very nice indeed. She was shrewd enough to know that whatever Lucy's deficiencies might be, she was by courtesy the mistress of her own home; and the degree of intimacy which, after her first interview with Romilly, she decided to cultivate there, could only be obtained by placing it at once upon a pleasant footing with Mrs. Macnorman.

Her own life now was hard, arid, uninteresting. The only man who had ever roused her into passion was Romilly Macnorman. The only friendship which could give either interest or excitement to her life was his friendship. And she must have interest, she must have ex-

citement. She meant no harm—so she said to herself, as with liveried servants before and behind her, she rolled home in her carriage from a call at the old Court-house, during which she had made arrangements to spend a quiet little evening with Lucy and Romilly on the following Thursday—not the slightest harm. She had kept her own honour and her husband's honour untarnished since their marriage, and she meant so to keep it to the end. She had been accustomed to have a train of admirers at her bidding in the West Indies, and no one had been audacious enough to breathe a whisper against her on that account. She did not mean to have quite such a train in England, especially in Aston-Royal, as it might be made the subject of gossip, being slightly opposed to the canons of propriety adopted in the place. But interest and excitement she must have, and in no form could she find them so charmingly and half-dangerously blended as in a quiet little evening at the old Court-house with Romilly Mac-

norman, and his washed-out, unsuspecting wife.

And so it was that about a month after that stately dinner-party at Aston Lodge, a month in which Mr. Macnorman and Mrs. Decameron had, quite by accident, of course, met at about a dozen concerts, flower-shows, operas, and evening-parties, Lucy found herself entertaining the planter's dark-browed wife, Mrs. Van Brooten and Tressa, in that same oriel room where three of the party had met under such different circumstances in the days of their youth.

Scarcely entertaining them, however, for Romilly, in whose absence Court-house sociality was rather a crumbling, unsatisfactory affair, had not yet made his appearance, and the shuttlecock of conversation, after being kept up for nearly an hour by the united efforts of Mrs. Van Brooten and Tressa, had fallen somewhere out of sight, no one apparently being inclined to look for it. Tressa and Mrs. Decameron had already begun to dislike each other with genuine womanly perception. Mrs.

Decameron disliked Tressa's simplicity, and Tressa disliked Mrs. Decameron's worldliness. As girls, eleven years ago, they had met and been friendly, just because Romilly wished to draw them together, in order that he might have more frequent opportunities of seeing Bertha at the Court-house; and for the sake of making its dullness less tedious to him. Tressa, not knowing his motives, had cultivated Miss Dolfen's acquaintance; but the two girls had nothing in common, Tressa's life being ruled by what she thought to be right, and Bertha's by what she felt to be pleasant. Now there was less sympathy than ever between them. Mr. Decameron's wife, rich in her husband, her servants, her home, her furniture, her jewels, felt that the marriage service which had bought them for her bound her to a miserable lie, and she never felt it more than when brought into association with Tressa, who, unblest with social position or wedded state, kept true to the memory of her early love, had never given hand of

hers as false pledge of a heart which already belonged to another, and so stood apart from the dishonest wife as the false stand apart from the true, the pure from the guilty. Nay, Tressa's very look, calm, clear, gentle, the peace, the stillness which seemed to shrine her round, were a perpetual rebuke to Bertha's uneasy conscience, and made her feel in her better moments as if she could have flung away everything, home, husband, wealth, position, to have brought back the maiden freedom which once she wore with a maiden's pride, and the poverty which was so rich, because, struggling through it, her heart could wander where it listed.

The evening was wearing away, and still Romilly did not come. Lucy, not being able to think of anything else to say, had recourse once more to the only subject in which Mrs. Decameron appeared to feel any interest—the cause of his continued absence, and the probable time of his return.

“I am so sorry,” she said, “and he was dread-

fully annoyed about it, too, for he had made arrangements to come home two hours earlier than usual ; but you know everything is obliged to give way to business. He almost wanted me to come over to you this morning and arrange another day, as it seemed uncertain when he would be able to come home, but he changed his mind afterwards, and said if he was not able to spend all the evening with us, it would be an excuse for your coming again before long."

Mrs. Decameron smiled more pleasantly than she had done since tea time.

"I am sure it was exceedingly kind of him."

"Oh! not at all," said Lucy. "I have no doubt he was thinking of himself, too, for I know he enjoys spending an evening with you very much. He was saying only the other day he hoped you would very often come in and see us, now that you are settled again in the town."

"Yes," said Mrs. Van Brooten, who had not

yet learned the happy art of saying the right thing in the right place, "I am sure he enjoys it very much indeed. I sometimes say if my James enjoyed anything so much, I should begin to be jealous. We ladies must learn to take care of our husbands now, must we not, Mrs. Macnorman, when such wonderful attractions are placed in their way? I tell James I won't have him going to Aston-House any more, unless he takes me with him. But it's all nonsense, you know. He just does as he likes. He's the best-natured old fellow in the world, is James."

And Mrs. Van Brooten laughed, the hearty, self-satisfied laugh of a woman who is absolutely contented with herself and her husband and every thing about her.

Lucy laughed too. Her wifely pride made her do that. But Mrs. Van Brooten's words brought just a touch of pain to her heart. She knew, she had known for long, that she could not satisfy all her husband's requirements. She knew that he found in society the charm which

he could no longer find at home ; and, simple little woman that she was, she had even been glad of Mrs. Decameron's return, because it made a new interest for him. But until now, the thought had never gained entrance to her heart that Mrs. Decameron herself, and not Mrs. Decameron's wit and brilliance, supplied what Romilly needed, what her simple homely love could not give. The thought had not yet shaped itself into even unspoken words, still less had it poisoned the springs of her womanly content. Still it was there now, for the first time, and she somehow felt that Mrs. Decameron's eyes were upon her, and that made her reply with a brightness which was rather forced.

“ Oh ! Mrs. Van Brooten, what a *funny* notion, to think that we should either of us need to be jealous of our husbands ! But I'm not a bit afraid of Romilly. He is just as good to me as ever he can be, and I could trust him anywhere. How nice it is when you care for them too much to be a bit afraid.”

Lucy was woman enough to feel a little spite as she said this, and she said it because she knew that Mrs. Decameron was looking very hard at her, just as if there was any need for her to be jealous of her husband, the father of her children. And she said it, too, that Mrs. Decameron, who, she was quite sure, cared little enough for that wizened, guinea-faced husband of hers, might see that she, Lucy Macnorman, was not a woman to be pitied, not perhaps to be pitied so much as the grand lady herself, with her servants and carriages and jewels, and all the rest of her fine things. For, though Mrs. Decameron was very nice, still she was rather patronising sometimes, and Lucy did not like to be patronised any more than she liked to be pitied.

Mrs. Decameron felt the thrust, though it was a very tiny one, so feeble as to be scarcely worth noticing; and from that time the two women stood in antagonism to each other, a perilous position for Lucy, even had she been ten

times cleverer and readier and wider awake than she was. Before, Mrs. Decameron had tolerated her; now, she began to hate her. Before, she had proposed to herself to win back Romilly's allegiance for her own satisfaction; now, she determined to do it for the humiliation of another, and that other his wife.

She put up her jewelled hand to hide a yawn.

"Shall we play chess, Mrs. Macnorman? You used to be fond of the game."

"Oh! yes," said Lucy, glad enough of any thing to pass the time. "I remember what you mean. Mr. Limpsie and I were playing that night, ever so long ago, when——"

"Yes, yes—the night I ran away from you, Mrs. Van Brooten," interrupted Bertha, turning to that lady, who was too obtuse and unperceptive to notice the little passage of arms which had just taken place between the two wives. Bertha always accepted her past position with Mrs. Van Brooten boldly, un-

compromisingly, in order that it might never be thrust upon her by others.

“And you had such trouble to take care of your king, too,” she continued, turning again to Lucy. “Mr. Macnorman had to keep telling you what to do with him. Oh! how well I remember it! and you always got into trouble if I talked to him for a little while, and made him forget to look after you. But Mr. Macnorman is not here to-night to take care of you, and so perhaps the king may come to grief after all.”

And the two ladies seated themselves at the chess-table, whilst Mrs. Van Brooten crossed over to have a comfortable chat with Tressa.

CHAPTER X.

“CHECK.”

This was said by Mrs. Decameron, some time after the game had begun. During the interval Miss Arbiton, now a large, bony, muscular advocate of women's rights, had come in to make a call—she made calls at most untimely hours sometimes, to support her attitude of defiance towards the foolish conventions of society—and after a brief greeting to the lady of the house, had joined Mrs. Van Brooten and Tressa on the other side of the room, and was enlightening both of them, but especially Tressa, as to the duties they owed to themselves and the world. Romilly also had come in, unperceived in the gather-

ing twilight by Lucy, who sat with her back to the door; unperceived indeed by any one but Bertha Dolfen. For full ten minutes he had been standing behind his wife, watching the progress of the game, and talking with his eyes to Bertha, who, seeing him at the moment of his entrance, had motioned him with a mute gesture to his present place. Lucy was bending over the chess-board, so absorbed in the safety of her king that she had no thought for anything else.

“Check.”

“How?” said Lucy.

Bertha did not speak, but placed a finger, blazing with diamonds and rubies, bound also with a wedding-ring, which did not blaze so brightly, upon her ebony queen, and looked straight up to Romilly, who returned the look with one of smiling intelligence, changing before it passed away into one of a different character altogether. He knew what she meant. She knew that he knew. He knew

that the understanding was mutual. And so they gazed straight into each other's eyes for a full minute, whilst Lucy was considering her next move. But then this was after more than one dinner-party. It was after two or three croquet parties, after a night at the theatre, after a quiet tête-à-tête in the conservatory whilst Mr. Decameron was at his club, after a long ramble in the Court-house garden, one moonlight evening, when Lucy had gone to Mrs. Van Brooten's.

Besides, a new motive was stirring in Bertha's heart to-night. If she had sought first to break Romilly's loyalty for the mere sake of triumphing over him, and then because his preference was needful to stay the awful hunger of her life, she sought to break it now because she was beginning to hate Lucy. The hollowness of her married life had been hinted at. Lucy, with all her meekness and quietness and apparent simplicity, had guessed too truly a secret which Bertha, for appear-

ance sake, would fain have kept intact. She did not care for her rickety, pompous old husband, not she; but it would be better for her position, things being as they were, if she could make people believe that she did.

“What am I to do?” said Lucy. “I do wish Romilly was here to help me.”

Again that bright full glance of mutual understanding over poor Lucy’s unconscious head.

She brought up a bishop to shelter her king. Alas! it was all she could do, the game being so far lost. Bertha smiled.

“You think because you have the priest on your side, you are safe, but you see I am too strong for him.”

Bertha took the bishop with her queen.

“Checkmate.”

“So it is,” said Lucy, and with a little touch of impatience she swept the pieces away. “I cannot contrive for myself, I am always sure to lose when it comes to a question of plotting. I cannot see before me.”

She rose. Romilly was standing just behind her.

“Oh, Romilly! is that you? I did not know you were here.”

“I have been here nearly a quarter of an hour,” he said, coolly.

“What! and you never offered to help me!”

“It is not fair play to help, you know.”

“But you helped me once before, and I won the game. I might have won it now, if you had done the same.”

“Yes, but you ought to be able to help yourself now.”

Lucy bit her lip, and ordered lights. Romilly went over to Mrs. Van Brooten’s side of the room, where Miss Arbiton was still holding forth on the woman-question.

“As I say to them, Mrs. Van Brooten, women are not to be considered any longer as graceful playthings. Ah! Mr. Macnorman, is that you? Now give me *your* opinion about it. Are wo-

men to be considered as graceful playthings? Am I a graceful plaything, now?"

And Miss Arbiton looked severe.

"Certainly not," said Romilly Macnorman. "No one with the least discernment would ever look upon you in such a light. It would be simply absurd."

"Yes, that is what I say to them. Then what do you think of my position?"

"That it is in the highest degree becoming to you," said Romilly, with a satirical glance at Miss Arbiton's long outstretched arm, and eagerly-bent-forward figure, and general aspect of metallic hardness.

"Yes," and down went Miss Arbiton's hand on the nearest convenience for a thump, which happened to be Tressa's shoulder. "I knew you would say so. I see you take a genuine interest in the subject, though you think it would compromise your dignity to appear prominently as its advocate."

"Do you mean that I should be compromised

by appearing prominently as the advocate of my own dignity, Miss Arbiton?"

"No, Mr. Macnorman, you do not understand me. I mean as the advocate of our cause. I want women to have influence."

"So they have," he replied, and as he said it he glanced across, not to his wife, but to the scarlet-lipped, low-browed woman who sat near her.

"Yes, yes, Mr. Macnorman, I know what you mean, you mean that they make fools of the men, but I don't want them to do that."

"Then perhaps you want them to make fools of themselves."

"Mr. Macnorman," and Miss Arbiton assumed her former cast-iron rigidity—"Mr. Macnorman, we women have rights, and we wish them acknowledged."

"I acknowledge them, Miss Arbiton, from the profoundest depths of my being," and Romilly made a bow as profound as his acknowledgments—"women's rights to rule over hearts,

homes, individuals, everything you like, in fact."

"No, we don't want everything you like, Mr. Macnorman. We want to be treated as if we were not mere women. I, for instance, am not a mere woman."

"I don't think you are, Miss Arbiton."

"Thank you. I knew you would grant my position. I am really delighted to find you are not so much an enemy to our cause as I thought you were. Then I demand the equality of women."

"You may demand whatever you like, Miss Arbiton," said Romilly, with another bow.

"Yes, but you know I mean you are to grant it."

"Grant whatever you like, Miss Arbiton?"

"No, you are to grant the equality of women."

"Well, I don't think that wants granting; but what you ladies generally mean when you talk about equality with men, simply means

superiority over them. You take all the advantages of your own position, and all the advantages of theirs, and the evils of neither, and then you call that equality. But we were speaking of feminine rights just now, will you ladies exercise your right to charm, and give us a little music?"

"I never play," said Miss Arbiton dogmatically. "I consider it a waste of precious time."

Romilly glanced towards Bertha. With a smile of infinite sweetness, she seated herself at the piano, and as he placed himself near her, began to sing the old favourite Spanish songs which he had listened to many and many a time in Mrs. Van Brooten's drawing-room. There was no want of animation about her now, none of that listless indifference which a couple of hours before had allowed subject after subject to drop unheeded. Lucy sat apart, keeping up the outside of a conversation with Miss Arbiton, but feeling rather piqued and out of

temper, partly because she had been checkmated, partly because Romilly had not come to help her ; but most of all, because of that keen glance which Mrs. Decameron had darted at her when Mrs. Van Brooten was joking about ladies being jealous of their husbands. Lucy was not clever enough to hide her vexation under the semblance of brightness. She forgot that her only chance of success was in looking pleasant and unconscious. She did not know that the best way of counteracting Mrs. Decameron's evil influence was to appear indifferent to it. And feeling as she did that little twinge of bitterness towards the splendid brunette, it did not tend to her satisfaction to see Romilly devoting himself to the Spanish music, turning over the leaves of the songs, talking to the singer in that low, confidential tone, which they generally adopted when they were conversing apart. A cloud settled down upon her usually sweet, though quiet face. It was a positive relief to her when Mrs. Van Brooten's carriage was announced,

and at the same time Miss Arbiton, who had been offered a seat in it, rose to leave.

But Mrs. Decameron, playing those delicious Spanish love-songs, and Romilly listening to them, seemed oblivious of the flight of time. Bertha knew her advantage, and was determined to enjoy it. Every drop that she could add to the bitterness of Lucy's cup, added to the pleasantness of her own. Some women can go on saying spiteful things to the end of their lives, and are none the worse for it; nay, their very spitefulness seems to give them a charm, like the lurking, half guessed, piquant seasoning of a carefully prepared dish. Others, by the tiniest flavouring of it, spoil themselves at once and for ever. Poor little Lucy's venture in that direction was likely to cost her dear. Her arrow had gone too near the mark, and it had been aimed at one who had plenty of weapons in reserve, either for defence or aggression. She could return a hundredfold, nay, a thousandfold, a slight, a taunt, a sting,

which wounded the outward seeming smoothness of her life. Now, also, she had two to conquer instead of one, and that made the game, if difficult, more fascinating.

“You have been very generous,” said Romilly, as his tawny panther-princess rose from the piano, after an hour of music-speech with him there, “but you have not given me the song I like best of all—Ximena to Alexis. I daresay you remember it, Lucy,” he added, turning to his wife; “Mrs. Decameron sang it when she came to the Court-house for the first time, we will not say how many years ago, will we? for one of the rights of women—and I daresay Miss Arbiton is quite alive to its importance, though she forgot to mention it this evening—is never to have the flight of time mentioned in their presence. It may be fifty years ago, you know, but that is of no consequence.”

“My memory is not so good as yours, Romilly. I have not the least recollection of the song you are talking about. Mrs. Decameron

must have favoured you with it when I was not listening. I shall be most happy, though, to have my memory refreshed, now."

Lucy said this with a slight air of formality, quite different from her usual simple, unassuming manner. Romilly and Mrs. Decameron perceived it and glanced at each other. On Bertha's part the glance was of exultation rather than annoyance.

"I should be delighted," she said, "to oblige you, but most unfortunately I am not able to remember the little ditty just now. However, when you come to see us I will sing it any number of times. Or, stay——"

And she turned carelessly to Mr. Macnorman, as though an idea that was scarcely worth the trouble of mentioning had just crossed her mind.

"The carriage should be here in half-an-hour, but it is a delicious evening and I would much rather walk home. If you like to come with me, and if Mrs. Macnorman will be kind enough

to spare you, you shall hear it to-night."

Of course poor Mrs. Macnorman was obliged to say, as pleasantly as she could, that she should be delighted to spare her husband to walk home with Mrs. Decameron.

"Only, you know," continued the charming creature, with a sweetly malignant smile upon her helpless victim, "you must not expect him back for ever so long. When once I begin to sing those old songs, I never know when to leave off—I don't, indeed. They bring back the old times, and the old memories so vividly."

"Is that why you love them, then?" Romilly asked, in a low tone.

"Yes," she answered, in a tone as low. "There are no friends like the old friends." And then for Lucy's ear, she added,

"You know I have such a fancy for going back to the past. I like to forget the present and live over again in my old haunts."

"So do I," said Romilly.

“Do you really? Then may I ask where you would like to be now?”

“Well, just now,” said Romilly, cautiously, “I should like to be walking home with you, for then I should be so much nearer to Ximena’s song.”

“Listen to this husband of yours,” said Mrs. Decameron, with mock raillery, “he wants me to go away, and he tells me so, looking at his watch all the time. If that is your English notion of politeness, I will take the hint.”

And with a bold, bright smile to him, she swept away, accompanied by Lucy, to prepare for her walk home.

“Good-night, *ma chere*,” she said, as they were starting, and lightly touched Lucy’s cheek with her red lips. “I know it is very naughty of me to run away with your protector in this way, but if gentlemen *will* insist on having Spanish songs sung to them, we cannot help it, can we? I will promise to send him back to you, however, as soon as he has had enough.

Farewell, Tressa. I know you think I am a reprobate, you look so very severely at me, but it would be a positive sin to roll home in a carriage on such a lovely night as this. You will not join us, I suppose; Mrs. Macnorman would feel too much deserted. Adieu; fifty thousand thanks for this lovely little scarf, I scarcely need anything extra, but Mr. Decameron makes such a fuss if I take cold, so I am obliged to be careful. Come soon, *mia cara*, I shall be delighted to see you any time."

"I don't like her a bit," thought Lucy to herself, as she watched them across the Courthouse garden. "I wonder why I don't, for she has been very nice indeed, to-night."

And then she went back slowly to the deserted room where the perfume which Mrs. Decameron had left behind her, still lingered. She did not feel bitter, but a strange sense of loneliness crept into her heart. She could only comfort herself by going and looking at little Martin as he lay asleep in his cot; and thinking

that, if not for her own sake, at least for the sake of his children, Romilly could not but love her a little even to the end. And perhaps Lucy was wicked enough to find the comfort more comfortable, because it was one of which beautiful Mrs. Decameron, with all her wealth and splendour, could never avail herself.

CHAPTER XI.

THE night was warm, hazy, half moonlight, one of those sweet September nights which draw their perfume from the flowers and their tenderest thoughts from human souls. Bertha Decameron and Romilly Macnorman sauntered leisurely along, speaking but little. It was a time for feeling rather than for words. On such a tranquil night as this, eleven years ago—nay, was it not the very same, the seventh of September?—they had walked that road together, walked it as silently as now; only then for one of them it had been the silence of wounded, angry pride, for the other of amused, self-satisfied triumph. Now it was the silence of thoughts that trembled to each other like half-shut

flowers in the dusk ; the stillness which comes between hearts that beat with the same pulses and stir with the same feeling.

The Abbey clock had but just struck ten when they reached Mr. Decameron's splendid mansion. He was away at his club. He generally spent his evenings at his club, unless there was an opportunity of displaying his jewelled empress of a wife at some public entertainment. Domesticity had become a nuisance for both of them, and so they agreed to drop it.

Mrs. Decameron, without summoning any of the servants, entered the house through the conservatory, of which she always carried a key, and led the way into the large empty drawing-room. Wax tapers were burning in sconces. A perfumed fountain was dripping over fern leaves and mosses. A faint scent of tropical flowers filled all the place, and the dim light scarcely served to show the subdued glow into which pictures, gilding, sculptures,

cushions and embroidered hangings, seemed to have melted. It was as though Bertha's soul, rich, gorgeous, self-indulgent, had distilled into the room, making it in that dreamy, delicious September night like some enchanted palace ; so different in its southern luxury from the simple yet refined atmosphere of the Court-house, into which Lucy's influence had distilled, as Bertha's into this.

Pointing him to one of the couches, close to the conservatory-door, Mrs. Decameron seated herself by the piano, and without searching either for music or words, began to sing in a low, luring voice the song which Romilly had asked for. He looked at her inquiringly. She only smiled.

"I could have remembered it easily enough," she said, "but I wanted you to listen to it here. I cannot sing to those cold-hearted women at the Court-house, as I would like to sing to you. They have no spirit to listen, and no soul to be stirred. You have both. I like to sing to you

best of all. How can you be so patient with your life? There is nothing for you to breathe there."

Romilly was very sensitive to flattery, and there was flattery both subtle and delicate in Bertha's words, pitying him as they did for the prosaic surroundings of his home, and hinting at the same time his superiority to them and his affinity with herself. And though the words which complimented him implied a slight to Lucy, yet the time had passed now when such a slight could spoil any of their sweetness. Romilly Macnorman was beginning to feel that he was decidedly thrown away upon the two quiet, ungifted women who could so little appreciate him. Six months ago, though the quietness of his daily life chafed him, even then, he could almost have killed the man or woman who dared to hint that it was not all he wished it to be. Now, he heard it pitied, and the wife who watched over it for him lightly esteemed, and not one manly instinct of defiance rose in

his heart ; nay, it was so much easier now to cherish the thought which Bertha's words suggested, that, being misappreciated in his own house, he should seek satisfaction for his finer tastes abroad. And that Bertha had not been truthful, even in so slight a matter, vexed him not at all. For was his own life now the very essence of honesty ? And was it not rather a relief than otherwise to find that where he had led the way, she was not afraid to follow ? He replied, in his easy careless fashion,

“ All right ; I am glad to listen to you anywhere.”

And then, leaning back amongst the downy cushions, he gave himself up to the influence of the place and of the music.

Both were very congenial. There was nothing about him to remind him of the rough work-a-day side of life. The splendid woman who was pouring out her warm soul in song just now was pouring it out for him. Her nature trembled to every touch of his. With

a gentle look, a tone more tender than was his wont, he could bring out chords of rich, passionate feeling. With an averted glance, with an indifferent word, with the sting of a bitter memory, he could drive her into the low plaint of submission, or rouse her to the flashing discord of defiance. Whether, holding so much sway over her, he yielded her none in return; whether, ruling her by his stronger spirit, she did not also rule him by her imperial beauty; whether to be lingering there, letting those waves of luxurious melody and more luxurious feeling splash and murmur on the shores of his heart, did not imply a subjection more mean than that in which he held this self-indulgent woman, were questions which Romilly never troubled himself to encounter. Enough that he found in her what he could not find at home. Enough that she was kindling his life into interest, giving him once more something to conquer, to triumph over, to glory in. Enough that she owned

him her master, not as Lucy did, with sweet unhesitating submission, but with fine elastic resistance, which was for ever rousing him to effort, and making him prize his victory more for that she would wait no willing captive on his pleasure.

At last she ceased, with a few long, sustained, delicious notes, and came quietly to his side.

"I suppose," she said, half laughingly, "Mrs. Macnorman will not like me to keep you any longer now." But the tones implied that if he was willing to be kept she was quite willing to keep him.

Romilly scarcely stirred, except to lay his hand for a moment on the soft jewelled fingers which had come so near his own.

"Go on playing," he said abruptly. "I like to hear you."

"I don't want to sing any more," she replied. "I have sung myself out. I wish it was a glorious moonlight night. I wish we

were on that mossy old parapet. I wish we were away in the West Indies, where it is always warm and dreamy. I wish everything was different."

"You are not happy, Bertha."

It was the first time he had called her by her Christian name since that frosty December night, when, crimson-robed, with flushed cheek and gleaming eyes, she had stood by his side and so nearly killed all that was noble within him with her lustrous earthly beauty. She was doing it now, doing it more boldly, more openly, more fatally than then, for no little white-robed figure at the oriel window stood like a fair pitying angel to win him back to truth and honour. No hand was opening any more the seldom-touched door in his heart which led heavenward to the light. Lucy, the patient wife, could not reach him now, as Lucy, the unconscious maiden, had reached him then.

"Happy?" said Bertha, with a wave-like

laugh, that seemed to break into a long low sigh on the rocks of some sharp regret. "My life is just one great, horrible mistake."

"Since how long ago?" he said.

"Since ten years ago last Christmas eve," she replied, with a defiant yet repentant gaze which cared to hide nothing now.

"I know it, Bertha," he said. "Poor Bertha!"

And then they looked into each other's eyes, not with that calm grief which, knowing that all is past and past for ever, accepts the long dreariness of life and bears it nobly; but with that unquiet, eager, questioning hope which asks how much yet remains, how much may yet be enjoyed, not how silently all may be given up.

"I think you must go," she said at last. "Mr. Decameron will soon be here, and perhaps he had better not see you when he comes."

She hesitated as she said this. The conscious colour deepened on her cheek. It was the first time she had owned the necessity of any concealment, and the last lingering instincts of a once truthful nature protested against the cheat. Then she had to gloss it over. The time had not come, even yet, when they could both of them unblushingly accept the lie which they had begun to live.

“I am tired. Those songs excite me. And I am always weary when I think of the past. Good-night. If you meet Mr. Decameron in the grounds tell him that I was faint, and that you walked home with me. I shall be at the archery ground to-morrow if it is fine. You go sometimes to see the shooting, do you not? Though I suppose Mrs. Macnorman does not approve of such frivolities.”

Again an opportunity for Romilly to take the part of the quiet little woman who loved

him so faithfully. Again he let it pass, and accepted the implied slight without a word of protest.

“I shall be there too. Good night, Bertha.”

Footsteps—the footsteps of Mr. Decameron—were heard on the gravelled path beneath the window.

“Through the conservatory door,” said Bertha, pointing to it. “There is plenty of time. Good night again.”

There was a kiss in their looks, though their hands only met in the common clasp of friendship ; and then Romilly disappeared, with a farewell wave of the hand, amidst a miniature grove of orange and myrtle bloom.

Mr. Decameron went up to his dressing-room. Bertha threw herself into the couch which Romilly had just left, and pressed her forehead on the cushions where his head had rested. Then, with a passionate impatient

gesture, she started up and began to pace the room like a wild creature.

"I cannot bear it—I will not bear it," she said to herself, as she stamped fiercely upon the lilies and roses of the splendid carpet which Mr. Decameron's money had bought for her. "I will do as I like! I will have what is my own! Romilly, Romilly! why do we not belong to each other? Why does that white-faced, pale-hearted woman keep you from me? I hate her! But she shall not keep my king—he is mine, and I will have him!"

Mr. Decameron came in, wizened, decrepit, wine-flushed. His wife was herself again in a moment.

"So soon home, Theodore? You came in at the front, I suppose? I did not hear you. I am so frightfully tired; those Court-house people are so stupid. Ring the bell, please, for Quinto to bring me a glass of cordial."

Meanwhile Romilly Macnorman walked quietly home, and had a pleasant stroll in the garden before rejoining his wife and Tressa. He felt neither doubtful nor uncomfortable. Once—it was the morning after Mrs. Van Brooten's dinner-party—there had been a little touch of disquiet at his heart, but that had passed away, and instead of it there had come the calm which is sadder than all storm—the calm of a conscience which has ceased to question or to doubt.

CHAPTER XII.

SLOWLY the lingering summer wore itself away, and the golden, full-ripe October faded into November's dim and dreary mists, across which the slant sunbeams smote but seldom and cheerlessly. And showers of brown leaves fell rotting, noisome, unsightly, from the skeleton trees, whose broidered raiment of beauty they had once been. And winter sucked out the life of the old year, and laid it to sleep under a snowy winding-sheet as of death.

Slowly, too, the lingering summer in Lucy's heart wore itself away. Slowly the golden full-ripe October of her content faded into the dreary mists of disappointment, and her

hope and her joy and her happiness fell like faded leaves from the patient heart which once they had so fairly robed ; and over all her life crept the winter of failing love, and the winding-sheet of sorrow.

Still there were a few slant rays of November sunshine falling feebly and cheerlessly upon a landscape which they could no longer light up. Romilly was very good to her, very kind ; kinder even than he had been for a long time, with a sort of pitying tenderness, as though he knew how earnestly she was striving to please him, how gladly she put her whole soul into the fulfilling of his daily wants. And truly, what she could do for him, she did with all her heart. So much of his life as she could reach, was filled with all the love which she could put into it. She never asked herself whether he might not have put more into her own. She was one of the few women who give, asking for nothing in return. Perhaps it was that very unselfish outgoing of her nature which kept it always sweet

and fresh. Perhaps it was what she gave, not what she took, whose wholesome current suffered no fatal stagnation in her life, cleared it of the noisome weeds and pestilential foulnesses which are apt to gather on the soul of the woman who never gives out but only takes in. And though sometimes there was a sad look upon her face, and though people who met her in company remarked that Mrs. Macnorman, "poor woman," had "gone off" wonderfully of late, still she kept struggling on with womanly braveness, doing for her husband what she could, and trying hard to be content that others should do for him what lay beyond her power.

"For," as she would say to Tressa, who seemed to be her only friend and helper now, "you know, darling, I was never cut out for Romilly. I ought to have seen that from the first; only when I loved him so much I could not help feeling quite sure that it would be all right. But, oh! it is not all right at all, and

sometimes I am afraid it never will be. The more I try to please him the more it seems as if he could do without me, and it's such a stupid thing, when I love him so much, to think that I'm not a bit of use to him. Perhaps it was selfish of me to have married him at all, when someone else might have done better; but when he asked me, how could I say anything but the truth? For I did love him, through and through; and I love him just the same now, if only he wasn't so different. Oh! Tressa, I never thought, when I used to come into this room to tea in the old times and felt so happy, that I should ever sit in it as Romilly's wife, and not feel happy at all. I try to be patient about it, but if things have to come right, I do wish they would be quick."

Tressa could only say what she had said many a time before, that light would come at last to those who waited for it, and did their duty whilst they were waiting. She had seen for months, indeed ever since she came to live at the

old Court-house again, how the home-life there was gradually crumbling away. She knew well enough that what Romilly gave to his wife now, he gave partly from duty and partly from pity ; not at all from a love which was its own life. He appeared to be continually reminding himself of what he ought to do, and doing it carefully, as one does an unaccustomed task. And poor Lucy's tenderness became burdensome to him, and her little affectionate ways and wiles were accepted with indifference, and her numberless patient acts of self-denial were either quite ignored, or received with an air of superiority which wounded Tressa even more than Lucy ; since Tressa could see Lucy's rights as well as her husband's, but Lucy could not see her own at all. Indeed she never seemed to feel that she had any, for her life was spent in ministering to those of another.

Tressa, seeing these things from day to day, used to wonder sometimes, whether, if all had

gone smoothly between her and Martin Thoresby, if their hands had been joined, even as their hearts were, life could ever have become such a failure for them as it seemed to have become for Romilly and his wife, and if the outward shows of attention could have been given so respectfully whilst the heart was silent all the time. And then she felt that there may be a loneliness far worse than the loneliness of the single woman's path; and that a love safely garnered where no change can pass upon it, is better and richer, though it bring no earthly treasure with it, than that which clings only to the cold dead image of duty.

There was only one change to which she could look, as likely to bring the husband and wife nearer to each other. This plan of a branch establishment abroad, most probably in the West Indies, was still talked about. Mr. Mason had set his mind upon the firm being represented there, and though no arrangement had been made for Romilly to go out, still the

way was open to him if he chose to go. Sometimes Tressa felt as if this might be the saving of them both. She knew that a love so faithful as Lucy's, must, sooner or later, win its own reward. She knew that in Romilly's heart, hard and selfish as much prosperity had made it, there was respect and reverence, and even a sort of tenderness for his wife. Somewhere, far out of sight, the roots of happiness were living still for both of them, though the withered branches bore neither fruit nor blossom any more. Perhaps if this plant of their love could be treated as gardeners treat flowers which are growing shapeless and deformed,—cut down entirely,—if the sharp knife of separation and absence were to shear away the unsightly stem which bore nothing either pleasant to look upon or good for food, a new growth might slowly spring from the living root and be nourished into something like comeliness. Romilly, shut out for awhile from those loving dutiful ministrations, which, though he owned

it not, were still needful to his comfort, might prize them more for their withdrawal. Lucy, taught to depend more entirely upon herself, her own resources brought out, and her nature, which was neither small nor feeble, but only self-distrustful, developed by freedom of action, might acquire a little of the self-confidence whose lack now made her appear so characterless ; and learn to think her own thoughts and speak them too, with a freedom which would almost give Romilly something worth conquering when he came back.

This was what Tressa said to herself, after the West Indian speculation had been talked about for some time ; but since Mr. Decameron's return to Aston-Royal, her anxiety for Romilly's departure had increased tenfold. With the clear, incisive vision of an honest soul, she looked into a troubled future for the faithful wife, if Romilly took up so easily and with such ready brightness the threads of the old intimacy, and began to weave them into a pattern inno-

cent enough eleven years ago, but very perilous under present circumstances. She saw only too plainly what Lucy, unable to comprehend her husband's nature, or the influence which a woman like Bertha Decameron was likely to exercise upon it, would never perceive until the bitter end was reached. She knew now whose hand was drawing so dark a curtain over life at the old Court-house. She had watched those two together, seen the subtle glances which passed between them, marked the lingering hand clasp, and the low tones of confidence; and her anger had been kindled, and her heart had ached for the misery in which such beginnings must find their slow result.

But it was no use speaking. Bertha was too passionate, Romilly too proud, to bear reproof from her. And to open Lucy's eyes to an evil which no sorrow of hers could check, would only be needless cruelty. Lucy's unconsciousness was her safeguard now. Mrs. Van Brooten's idle words on the occasion of Mrs. Decameron's

first visit to the Macnormans, had raised a passing cloud of temper; but however painfully Lucy might feel the shortcomings of her husband's love, her faith in his honour was fast rooted still. Her innocent little heart would have flamed into indignation had anyone dared to breathe a word against him, or hint that what he withheld from her was given to strangers. Even to convince her of the truth would only make her bitter and suspicious; then peace would be slain, reconciliation would become impossible, the ghost of lost truth would for ever stand between them, and forgiveness, if sought or granted, be powerless to join again the hands which unfaith had parted.

If Romilly would but go away for six months, for a year, for two years. That might mend all. That seemed the only prospect of relief from the slow death-in-life of their home happiness, or of cure from worse than death, from the plague spot of disloyalty. But Romilly was not at all inclined to go away now. When the pro-

posal was first made that he should superintend the establishment of a branch of the business in the West Indies, he had appeared eager to avail himself of the change, and Lucy's disinclination to such a long separation had had little weight with him. But since then, when Mr. Mason had pressed the subject upon him, he had raised objection after objection, had seen insuperable obstacles in the way of so lengthened an absence from Aston-Royal; and now at last, a senior clerk in the firm, an unmarried man of energetic disposition, was under directions to hold himself in readiness at any time, should the partners still decide upon carrying out their plan.

Tressa saw too plainly the cause of Romilly's disinclination to the undertaking. Mrs. Decameron, not Lucy nor children nor home, was the tie which bound him to a life whose dull routine had just before appeared so wearisome to him. Something ought to be done. But how? Tressa could find no way to answer that

question. Scarcely a week passed over in which Romilly did not find some pretext for spending an evening amongst Mr. Decameron's splendid collection of tropical plants, or of joining the wizened old gentleman and his superb wife at some public entertainment in the town. And though Mrs. Decameron seldom came to the Court-house now, though the intimacy which was to have been so exceedingly close and delightful between herself and Mrs. Macnorman had dwindled to a morning call now and then, and an occasional evening for chess or whist when no other guests were present, still the call was always made when the master of the house chanced to be spending an hour at home, and the quiet little evening was invariably arranged when Romilly's various town engagements, so very pressing and unavoidable at all other times, could be set aside to allow of his accompanying Mrs. Decameron—who never knew exactly when to order her carriage—down the quiet unfrequented road which led from the

Court-house precincts to the Cuban planter's palace-like residence. And when they had arrived there, it was only natural that he should go in to shake hands with Mr. Decameron; and if Mr. Decameron did not happen to be at home, which he never did, there was still no harm in going in and chatting for half an hour, or listening to a Spanish ballad or two, or admiring the birds in the conservatory, and then coming home and saying nothing about it. On such occasions Bertha's apologies for depriving Mrs. Macnorman of her husband's society were made with easy indifference and a brilliant affectation of regret, and accompanied by a charming smile which made Lucy, who failed to see the poison behind it, uncomfortable, she knew not why. Tressa saw both the smile and the poison. She knew what one indicated and what the other covered, and she began to feel towards Bertha Decameron that righteous, unsinning anger which is the protest of an honest soul against deceit and guile of every hue.

But it was not her place to act, as yet. She could not, with any hope of good result, rebuke Romilly for the frequent recurrence of an act of politeness whose withdrawal would have been discourteous to his guest ; and to reproach Mrs. Decameron for the sweetness of her smiles and the uncertainty of her coachman, would have been a manifest impropriety too. And to open Lucy's eyes to any impending danger, would only hasten a catastrophe which patience and apparent unconsciousness might possibly avert, even yet. She could only hope and pray for a change of some sort to pass over the fatally quiet surface of life ; and wait, until, if no other remedy came, actual proof gave her the right to speak boldly to her cousin and Mrs. Decameron of the evil they were working.

If Tressa, however, knew the virtue of silence, some others did not. Mrs. Egremont, who seldom laid her finger upon anyone's reputation without leaving an ugly mark there, when she took it up again, had her own opin-

ions about what was going on. She was thankful to say no one could accuse her of being a woman who went about making mischief between married people, but if Mrs. Macnorman, "poor thing," knew her duty as a wife ought to know it, she would take up her cross and go into public a little oftener with that popular, entertaining husband of hers, and not let him be constantly dangling at flower-shows, concerts and play-houses, after that great tawny woman with her scarlet raiment and her flashing jewels; chatting with her, and holding her bouquet, and attending her to her carriage, just as if neither of them belonged to someone else, and had homes of their own which they ought to have been taking care of. That sort of thing might be West Indian manners, most likely it was, or Mr. Decameron would not take it so quietly; but it did not suit English notions of propriety, and if Mr. Macnorman did not mind what he was doing he would get himself into trouble.

Mrs. Decameron meant mischief. That was

what Mrs. Decameron meant. That was what she had come back to Aston-Royal for, to pay off Mrs. Macnorman, "poor woman," for marrying the man that she would like to have had for her own husband. She had said, years and years ago, when young Mr. Romilly gave Miss Dolfen the slip, that he would live to repent it, and now her words were coming true. Miss Dolfen was not a girl to forget a slight of that kind, and Mrs. Decameron was not a woman to let her revenge pass by. If she was not very much mistaken, there would be an upset at the old Court-house again before long, perhaps a worse upset than when old Mr. Macnorman went off with the Insurance Company's cash. Going off with other people's money was bad enough, but going off with other people's wives was a great deal worse, and she should not be a bit surprised if that was what it came to in the end, with Miss Dovercourt's cousin and the wizened old planter's magnificent lady.

She wondered if Mrs. Macnorman knew how things were going on. If she didn't, someone ought to give her a hint about it, or she would be waking one of these fine mornings to find herself worse than a widow, a great deal worse. She should like to go over to the old Court-house herself, and open the poor woman's eyes a little; but the call that she made when first they came back to Aston-Royal, had never been returned, and no one should have it to say of her, Mrs. Egremont, that she thrust herself into other people's houses where she wasn't wanted. No, somebody else might go and break it to her, and the sooner the better. Most likely, though, she knew already. She had looked very pinched and miserable of late, never stirred out into company, never put her head into a drawing-room, or went to a public meeting of any sort; and as for taking an interest in the Postern Chapel cause, where she used to worship when she was a young person, Mrs. Egremont dare take upon herself to say she had never had the

grace to go in and see the new pulpit which Mr. Macnorman, her husband's father, put up and paid for with somebody else's money, just before that terrible smash of his. Disappointment, that was it. Disappointment, and vexation, and jealousy. Poor thing! Mrs. Egremont was very sorry for her; but it had been a good thing for her when she married him, and when people had eaten the gilt off their gingerbread they must be content to take the rest as it came.

Mrs. Egremont said all this to Miss Arbiton, and Miss Arbiton repeated it to Mrs. Van Brooten. But Mrs. Van Brooten only laughed again, her hearty, jolly, goodnatured laugh, and made light of the whole affair. She knew Mrs. Decameron when she was a girl, and it was just her way, nothing but her way. She meant no mischief, not she; only to amuse herself, for it must be stupid work, sitting opposite that ugly, parchmenty, beak-nosed old husband of hers, from morning to night, day in and day

out, waiting for him to drop off and leave her to enjoy her riches as she liked. No wonder that she took up with anyone that was bright and clever, especially Mr. Macnorman, who could do what he liked with anyone, and who used to be so very attentive to her before she was married. Of course it gave people a handle to take hold of, Mrs. Van Brooten could not deny that, and there *were* people who, when once they got hold of a handle, never stopped turning it until they had opened the door upon no end of disagreeableness; and perhaps it would be better if, seeing that evil-disposed people were beginning to talk, Mr. Macnorman and Mrs. Decameron had been a trifle more guarded in their public appearances; but as for there being any harm in it, and as for Mrs. Macnorman wanting anyone to give her a hint, and as for the acquaintance being ever likely to go beyond the merest friendship, Mrs. Van Brooten would as soon suspect her own James of going farther than he ought to go; and

everyone knew that James, with all his pleasantness and freedom, was as safe as the Bank of England, if it really came to a question of propriety. Mrs. Egremont ought to be ashamed of putting such reports about, and destroying the peace of innocent homes, and Mrs. Van Brooten hoped Miss Arbiton would tell her so.

Miss Arbiton did tell her so, and Mrs. Egremont, whose husband was Mr. Van Brooten's accountant, felt that her own interests compelled her to shut her mouth. She shut it accordingly, but, like the parrot which had lost its tongue, she thought the more.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE grey-eyed winter wore itself away. One by one little green-tipped snow-drops peeped out in the Court-house garden, and baby Martin, Tressa's godchild, toddling about under the yew trees, shouted for delight at the great yellow crocus blooms which laughed up at him like mouthfuls of ripe juicy orange from the grass plots. And then all the sweet spring flowers came trooping out, and the trees put on their beautiful garments, and the sparrows twittered in the ivy round Tressa's casement-window, and the rooks opened their parliament in the quadrangle elms, and there was a sound everywhere as of the pulsing and stirring of life

and hope, and love and happiness, that had been laid to sleep all through the long dreary winter time.

But no spring came to Lucy, as she toiled patiently on with such work as she could do for the husband who seldom rewarded it now by a kind word or a loving look. Her life seemed all December, and not even a beam of low slant sunshine glanced athwart it any more, save such as her own unfailing, though uncherished love could give.

Romilly felt ill at ease. He was not a hypocrite yet. There was a residue of honour in him which would not suffer him to be gay and bright and unconscious in the home whose duties were a weariness and whose companionship was a pain. He felt the manhood dying out of him, and he could not let it go without a pang. From time to time there came to him thoughts, tender, regretful thoughts, which, had he given them welcome, would have led him on to peace. He would not welcome them, he would not fol-

low whither they led, but their very presence did something for him, made him tremble irresolutely even under the sunshine of Bertha's smiles, and despise himself for being able to enjoy the pleasure from which, nevertheless, he was not brave enough wholly to tear himself away.

For though Mrs. Decameron could be very delightful to some people, she could be quite the reverse to others. And the rickety old gentleman, with the very shrunken calves, and the very yellow face, and the very brown wig, and the very beaked nose, who provided her splendid furniture and her silken curtains, and her downy couches and her perfumed fountains and her gorgeous conservatories, and surrounded her with all the appliances of wealth and luxury, in return for a trifling little falsehood told at the altar seven years ago, was one of those to whom she chose to be the reverse of delightful. She had not cared to avail herself very constantly of his society, even in the early

years of her married life, when the temptations which lured her from it appealed only to her vanity and love of display. Still less did she care for it now, when the only love which had ever stirred her great, strong, selfish, passionate heart, came back upon it with tenfold force and fascination, and struck out of it the spark, which, falling upon the dry withered bands of restraint and self-respect, burned them into ashes and left her free to wander whither she would. The only window through which she looked out to the light, was that which Romilly Macnorman had opened in her life. The only homage, the only admiration she cared to win, was that which he gave her. Haughty, imperious, tyrannical with everyone else, she was docile as a tame leopard with him; only showing by an occasional flash of temper, a burst of jealousy, that the wild spirit within her was but chained, not cast out.

So it came to pass that Mr. Decameron, finding the evenings dreary in that gild-

ed drawing-room of his, where his torpid, brown-eyed wife lay coiled up amongst her cushions, strolled away to the Aston-Royal club, and comforted himself with good wine and fellowship there. And Romilly Macnorman, finding his evenings as dreary in that quiet parlour at the Court-house, where patient little Lucy stitched away with pale face and lustreless eyes at the children's pinafores, strolled away to the Aston-Royal club, too, and seeing Mr. Decameron there, came out again and bent his steps towards the splendid mansion on the London Road, where brighter smiles and warmer glances than any home could give, were not wanting for him.

For Romilly wanted bright smiles, he wanted warm looks, and he wanted colour, and depth, and brilliance, on the else dreary tapestry work of his life. He was by no means unselfish. Few men are upon whom the world smiles as it had smiled upon him; who at eight and thirty find life not at all a waste howling wilderness, but a state

compacted of success, prosperity and popularity. And since his own home could not give him what he wanted, he would take it out of another. Bertha could supply his needs better than Lucy; to Bertha therefore he went, for was not the world made to give him all that he could get out of it, and why should he deny himself anything which, without committing his character, position, and prospects, would make the days pass more pleasantly? Bertha's society was not exactly to him what his was to her, but still it was very fascinating; and she defied him enough even yet, to make the triumph of mastering her a piquant and relishable enjoyment.

So night after night found him at her side in the myrtle-blossomed shadow of Mr. Decameron's conservatory, or holding the ribbon of her guitar as she sang those Spanish songs, and sang them sweetly too, neither smile nor glance being wanting to reveal the singer's heart. It was not a fair life, and Romilly could not love

himself for living it ; but it was an easy one, and ministered to his vanity, and was too pleasant to be given up, and he did not ask whither it would lead him in the end. So too, night after night found Lucy sitting in the wainscotted parlour of the old Court-house, alone, except for Tressa's companionship ; and Tressa, haunted now by the continually strengthening conviction of evil near at hand for those she loved, could not always rouse herself to be bright and merry, and make the hours pass somewhat less slowly for the neglected, unloved wife. That also was not a fair life, neither was it an easy one ; but Lucy lived it as patiently as she could, being one of those gentle, sweet-hearted women, who, instead of chafing over their sorrows, hold up past gladness to present gloom, and so strive to be content.

Perhaps Romilly thought too, sometimes, that it was not an easy life for her. Perhaps, though he gave her little love now, the very

poverty of that gift made him more careful about the setting in which it was offered ; made him more mindful of those outward shows of respect which keep a man's domestic character unspotted from scandal and suspicion. At any rate, he began to insist upon her going into company a little oftener, and making her appearance at his side in those public amusements from which her quiet tastes, and a few lingering conscientious scruples, would have kept her away. So one night he brought home tickets for the theatre, where "The Lady of Lyons" was being performed by an unusually good company. He brought also the intimation that Mr. and Mrs. Decameron would join them, having taken places next to theirs ; and that they would call at the Court-house on their way, so that the whole party might go together. On the day of the performance, Lucy had a headache and was obliged to remain in her room, so the ticket was transferred to Tressa, with directions from Romilly that she was to be ready at

half-past seven, at which time Mr. and Mrs. Decameron were to call, and he would himself, if possible, so arrange his town engagements as to return by that time. If not, Tressa was to place herself under Mrs. Decameron's protection, and Romilly would join them in their places as soon as circumstances permitted.

Punctually at the appointed time, Mr. and Mrs. Decameron made their appearance. Tressa, in her own room, putting the finishing touches to her toilette, did not know of their arrival, for that little casement window of hers was far away from the entrance, and she had been too much absorbed in her own thoughts—sad thoughts about Romilly and Lucy—even to hear the carriage drive up. As she came out of her room to go downstairs, she turned aside to say good-night to the meek little woman who was struggling so bravely with headache and heartache too. On a bracket close to the door of Lucy's dressing-room, lay a bouquet of exquisite hothouse flowers. She knew that Romil-

ly had ordered one for his wife, and Lucy being unable to use it, the gift was to be passed over to herself. So, imagining that this was for her own use, she took it up and began to admire the exquisite grace of its arrangement. The centre flower was a pure, stainless, white lily of the Nile. Folded around its golden finger was a tiny slip of paper—a message to herself, most likely, from Romilly, though he was not wont to send them in such a ballad-romance fashion. She disengaged it carefully, and read it. It contained these words, written in Bertha's free, careless hand :—

“To-morrow night. In the conservatory. At eight. Ever your own.”

That was not from Romilly, certainly. Tressa was rather vexed, for the bouquet was evidently a mistake. The handwriting was Mrs. Decameron's, beyond a doubt ; but how it should have come there, or for whom it was intended, Tressa could not imagine. Just

then one of the servants crossed the corridor.

“Allen, whose flowers are these? Have they been sent by Mr. Macnorman?”

“No, Miss; they belong to Mrs. Decameron. She just laid them there whilst she went into the room to speak to my mistress. She was afraid the hot room might fade them.”

“All right, Allen.” And Tressa came downstairs, more puzzled than ever, and a little uneasy. Mr. Decameron was already fussing and fidgetting in the oriel room, and vexing himself about the horses, which, he said, were not accustomed to be kept waiting so long. Allen was therefore despatched with a message to Mrs. Decameron, who presently made her appearance in all the glories of evening costume, the bouquet, into whose white heart Tressa had unawares pierced too deeply, nestling unconsciously enough upon the scarlet glow of an ermine-faced, satin-lined opera-cloak, which Mrs. Decameron wore with the grace of an empress.

Romilly did not come in time, so they were obliged to set off without him, empress Bertha so arranging matters, however, that when they took their places in the theatre the vacant seat which he must occupy was at her side. The first act was nearly over when he arrived. A splendid, indolent smile was his welcome, as Mrs. Macnorman gathered up her cloak, bouquet, fan, and embroidered gossamer of a handkerchief from the place which she had reserved for him.

“It is such a thousand pities that poor Mrs. Macnorman could not come,” she remarked, in a slightly raised, company voice, for the benefit of Mr. Decameron, and Tressa, and any one else who might feel inclined to pay attention. “I was so distressed for her. She always has a headache when you want to take her out. You really ought to have advice for her, Mr. Macnorman—change of air, or German baths, or something of that sort.”

And Mrs. Decameron leaned her soft cheek, a

little touched perhaps with rouge, upon the white and perfumed lily, which seemed to brighten its brilliance. There never was a woman who knew better how to avail herself of the effects of light and shade, tone, colour, and contrast than this West Indian brunette, who, when well got up and seen by artificial light, was, even at five and thirty, like some gorgeous tropic flower herself.

“Hush!” said Romilly, who had not yet reached the stage of liking to hear his wife pitied in public. “I never like to miss this charming little bit between the prince and Pauline. Pauline is very good. The prince is scarcely impassioned enough.”

Bertha sneered.

“Of course his passion depends upon the sort of Pauline he has to play to. She is too milk-and-watery. It would be ridiculous to be passionate with a woman like that. She only does to pet and caress.”

“I don’t know that; we shall see when the

trial of her love comes. I always say a woman can't go through that act unless she has a touch of the angel in her. I think this milk-and-water Pauline, as you call her, will do it after all. But we shall disturb the people."

Bertha leaned back, and watched, with scarcely-concealed impatience, the fair, gentle, maidenly Pauline go through her pretty little love scenes with the gay, handsome prince. Pauline was too much like Lucy, the prince too much like Romilly, to make the picture a pleasant one. At the end of the first act she turned to Mr. Decameron.

"Dorro, take me into the corridor for a few minutes. The air here is absolutely stifling."

Dorro, all attention and obsequious submission, wrapped the scarlet cloak over his wife's shoulder, handed her her fan and vinaigrette, and was about to take charge of her bouquet.

"No. I shall leave that behind," she said, haughtily, "I do not want to be troubled with

it. Mr. Macnorman, may I trouble you? Will you take care of my flowers for me, whilst I try to keep myself from fainting? You can study eastern poetry in them, if you like," she added, with a lightning flash of intelligence in her bold brown eyes as she held them to him.

Romilly bowed, took the flowers, and Mr. and Mrs. Decameron went away. Tressa, sitting near him, saw the little note nestling in the lily's heart. He toyed with them for a few moments, made one or two trifling remarks on their beauty, tried the effect of a re-adjustment of their positions, laid them down on the cushion before him, and Tressa saw that the little note was gone.

After a few moments Mr. and Mrs. Decameron returned.

"How do you like my flowers, Mr. Macnorman?" she said, with one of her richest smiles. "I arranged them myself. I never allow Mr. Decameron to order bouquets for me. Those things that the florists put together are so

atrocious. Don't you think my taste is much better?"

And her eager glance shot into the lily's heart, and thence to Romilly's outward-seeming unconscious face, unconscious at least save for the attention which common politeness required him to pay to a beautiful and fascinating woman.

"Your taste is perfect," he replied, in a low voice.

"You understand my arrangement, then."

"Of flowers?—yes. That white lily brings out the richness of all the rest so well. It is a lovely flower."

Tressa heard, and understood, too, and the righteous indignation of an honest heart stirred within her, as she listened to the apparently innocent conversation under which so dark a current of falsehood was silently flowing. The curtain drew up: Pauline, in her sweet bridal beauty, stepped forward into the humble little cottage where the peasant woman makes ready

for her son's return. A look of surprise passed over her face, as she gazed around upon the scanty furniture and the rude accommodation to which her princely bridegroom had brought her; and with a shadow of pride upon her fairness, she asked—

“Do you not know, then, who my husband is?”

“Alas, Madame,” said the mother, “it is you, I fear, who do not know him.”

The words smote sadly on Tressa's ear, the more so that Pauline's beauty and the patient sweetness of her bearing seemed akin to Lucy, as also the unsuspecting ignorance which yet must sooner or later learn the truth. All the rest after that seemed to pass in a dream. Seeing, she saw not; and hearing, the words had little meaning for her. One thing only stood clearly out in the light of that pitiful revelation. She must speak, and speak at once. She could put into words now what she had only put into thoughts before. Lucy's love and Romilly's

honour alike demanded the breaking of that silence which, continued longer, would be a sin. She would wait only until the time appointed for that meeting had passed. If Romilly stayed at home, there was yet hope that she had done him an injustice in questioning his loyalty to the wife who loved him. If he went, she would hesitate no more. For good or for evil, those who did the wrong should be brought face to face with it.

CHAPTER XIV.

NEXT evening, when Tressa came down at teatime, there were but two cups and saucers on the tray.

“Will not Romilly be here to-night?” she asked, with a surprise that was but seeming. Poor Tressa! she was often obliged now to put on that gentle hypocrisy which will not, dare not, tell how much it knows. And she had never worn the unfamiliar garb more sadly than now.

“No,” said Lucy, in a somewhat disappointed tone, “I wanted him very much to stay, for he has been out such a great deal lately. I never seem to have him a bit to myself. But he said he had promised Mr. and Mrs. Decamer-

on to go in and see some fresh flowers which have just been sent from abroad. I wish Mrs. Decameron's conservatory was at the north pole."

"And so do I," said Tressa.

And then the two women sat down to their quiet meal, and still more quiet evening. Lucy was slightly vexed at being left; not bitter or jealous, only vexed, because Romilly had been out already four evenings in succession, and she thought he might have staid at home to-night to make up for her disappointment in not going out with him the night before. Tressa was not vexed, she was angry, with a good woman's anger against falsehood and doublefacedness of every kind. She thought it all over as she sat there, listening to Lucy's simple domestic chatter about the children and the servants. Her anger burned most keenly against Mrs. Decameron, because from the beginning she had taken the lead in enticing Romilly from his allegiance to Lucy. Perhaps,

also, being herself a woman, and an upright, conscientious woman, she judged other women more severely than an equally upright and conscientious man would have done. Tressa had more magnanimity than most women, but not nearly so much as most men; and Mrs. Decameron's fault was that which even the noblest women, especially women who love once and no more, rarely forgive.

She determined, without saying a word to anyone on the subject, to go to Aston House first thing next morning, at such an hour as would place her visit entirely out of the pale of a ceremonious call. She would face Mrs. Decameron boldly with the truth, demand from her an explanation of her conduct, and an entire cessation of her intimacy with Lucy's husband. Upon the spirit in which this demand was met would depend the rest.

So as soon as Romilly was away to business, and Lucy fairly afloat upon her domestic duties, Tressa started to Mr. Decameron's mansion on

the London Road. The page, a grinning little negro, who seemed made to match the tropical luxury of the place, admitted that his mistress was at home, but did not think she could receive callers at so early an hour.

“Tell your mistress that I am not a caller,” said Tressa, with a determined glance into the boy’s black eyes; “say that I have come upon important business.”

He showed her into the drawing-room, and left her there. After a delay of a quarter of an hour, Mrs. Decameron came in, habited in a loose dressing-gown of orange and black cashmere, her black hair wrapped untidily round her head, neither jewels nor ornaments about her, save her wife’s ring, which shone with a dull lustre on her large soft hand. She did not look quite so beautiful as when, a couple of nights before, she had come, with her scarlet raiment and gleaming flowers and coral twined hair, into the Court-house room. When neither splendidly defiant, nor

superbly indolent, nor sweetly charming, Mrs. Decameron was, to speak the truth, slightly commonplace. She was much more dependent now than she used to be ten years ago, upon the skill of her dressmaker, or the artifice of her lady's-maid. Assisted by neither at present, in the trying yellow light of early morning, the somewhat liberal fulness of her contour unrestrained by tightly-fitting costume, her swarthy complexion untouched by the wonder-working hare's-foot, Mr. Decameron's imposing wife narrowly escaped positive plainness.

Besides, she never knew exactly how to behave to Tressa Dovercourt, whose simple dignity could neither be patronized or petted. She knew that Romilly Macnorman's cousin understood her; she felt that she despised her. In her full-dress splendour of satin and jewels, braided hair, and brodered robe, she could overpower this obscure, unwedded woman; but in her morning disarray, with neither sheen of satin nor flash of jewels, nor the charm of

power which these conferred, she felt that the unwedded woman had rather the best of it. She came into the room looking slightly annoyed.

“You must excuse my dress, I would not stay to change it. Of course you know I scarcely expected callers at this hour in the morning.”

“No,” said Tressa, “and I suppose it is I who ought to apologise for coming at such an unreasonable time. I wished, however, to see you early, as I had business of importance.”

“Yes, yes, so Quinto told me. But, you know, I am always delighted to see anyone from the Court-house,” said Mrs. Decameron, with an ineffectual assumption of the patronising graciousness which only harmonised properly with full-dress splendours. “I don’t think I would have come down to anyone else, only I wished to hear about poor dear Mrs. Macnorman. I hope her headache is better. It was so exceedingly unfortunate that she could

not accompany us to see that charming 'Lady of Lyons.' Pretty thing, is it not?"

Tressa replied that it *was* a pretty thing, and that Mrs. Macnorman's headache was better.

"I ought to have called, or sent to inquire, I suppose," said the brown beauty, "but I am really so crushed with engagements just now, that it quite escaped my recollection."

"And possibly," added Tressa, "you might have opportunities of satisfying yourself without the trouble of calling."

Mrs. Decameron's eyes flashed rapidly away.

"You mean Theodore might meet Mr. Macnorman at the club. No, I don't think he did. In fact he had an engagement elsewhere. But Quinto said your business was very important. Nothing serious, I hope."

And the expression of Mrs. Decameron's face seemed to imply a wish that the business might be proceeded with, and the interview cut short. Accordingly Tressa began, very calmly and quietly, with her simple story.

“I have come to tell you what happened the night before last, when we went to the theatre together. As I left my room to come downstairs and be in readiness for you, I found a bouquet lying on the table, close to my cousin’s door. As one was to be sent for me, I imagined this was it, so I took it up and found within one of the flowers a little slip of paper, with a message upon it. This was the message:—‘Tomorrow night. In the conservatory. At eight. Ever your own.’”

“And you dared,” said Mrs. Decameron, with a magnificent appeal to Tressa’s sense of honour—“you *dared* to read a message which was intended for someone—at least, which was not intended for you?”

“I dared to read what I supposed was addressed to myself,” replied Tressa, firmly. “And when I discovered my mistake, I replaced the note where I had found it. One of the servants, who happened to be passing, told me that the flowers were yours. I was puzzled,

but made no remark. At the theatre I saw you hand the flowers to my cousin Romilly, with a request that he would take care of them for you. When he received them, the slip of paper was there; when he gave them back, it was gone. Then I understood. But still I wanted to see if the appointment which you had made in this way would be kept. You know as well as I do that it *was* kept. And I have come now to ask you whether you think it is an honourable thing for Mr. Decameron's wife to make such appointments with Mrs. Macnorman's husband. I have to tell you, too, that I have seen much more, which was unintelligible to me until this explained it; but I waited until I had some clear proof, before I would speak to you about it. This is all I have to say."

The two women looked at each other for a moment, face to face, in a silence upon which the ticking of the little *ormolu* clock on the marble bracket, and the drip of the tiny cascade in the conservatory, could be distinctly heard. At the

outset of Tressa's simple statement of facts, a flush of scarlet fury had lighted up Mrs. Decameron's face, and then retreating, left it white with impotent rage. As she listened, the expression changed. Her first impulse was a murderous one. She could have clutched at the throat of Romilly Macnorman's cousin and choked her there and then, and left her lying quietly enough on the lilies and roses of the drawing-room carpet. But the consequences would have been unpleasant, and so the murderous impulse had to be put away. Her next was to pour out a torrent of passionate indignation on the calm, self-possessed woman who stood waiting her reply. That, too, had to be put away. Miss Dovercourt had but spoken facts, and no amount of passionate indignation could gainsay or resist them. Her next was to assume an attitude of haughty indifference, to affect ignorance and surprise, unbounded astonishment at the presumption which dared to cast a slur upon her character, or even imply that

Theodore Decameron's wife was not all which the most inexorable censor of social morality could expect her to be. That impulse, too, had to go with the rest. Hints, aspersions, doubts, inuendoes, might be stormed or frowned down, or simply dismissed with courteous contempt; but Tressa's weapon was the truth, and no shield could parry that.

Fury, passion, contempt and indifference being therefore impossible, Mrs. Decameron took a different track altogether, one which astonished Tressa as much as it softened the somewhat harsh, severe thoughts which she had been thinking during that little pause of silence. Bertha assumed the *rôle* of penitent beauty. She did not quite know whether that would serve her purpose, but if it did not, none of the others would.

"Miss Dovercourt," she said, looking away past her unwelcome visitor to the embowered conservatory, whose myrtle boughs had so often rustled to the touch of another visitor, not un-

welcome at all—"Miss Dovercourt, you have told me the truth. I have been very foolish. Judged by your standard of right and wrong, which I know to be a lofty one, I have been more than foolish. Will you allow me to explain to you somewhat of my past life, and then perhaps you will judge me less severely? At least judgment will be tempered with mercy."

Tressa, taken completely by surprise, met with penitence where she had only looked for defiance, and quite softened into regret for the plainness with which she had just spoken, could but express her entire willingness to hear whatever Mrs. Decameron had to say; and that lady, seeing her advantage, continued in the same gentle, subdued strain:

"Miss Dovercourt, it is no use hiding from you the fact that your cousin, Mr. Romilly Macnorman, is the only one I have ever loved. I loved him eleven years ago, when I was Mrs. Van Brooten's governess. I loved him all

the time I was in the West Indies. I love him now. I know you will think me very wicked, but I love him now. I cannot help it. We cannot help things, you know, when we would. I went away from Aston-Royal because I felt he did not give to me as much as I gave to him. I returned to my own people and tried to forget him, for I was very proud, and he had wounded my pride; but I could not. Then I married Mr. Decameron, because I wanted taking care of. I was tired of working, and I wished for ease, power, luxury—all that his money could give me. Too late I found what a terrible mistake I had made. I could not stay out there any longer. I was hungry to see the place where I had been so happy, and I made my husband bring me here. I wanted to see Aston-Royal and your cousin again—nothing more than that. All that has taken place since then has been my misfortune—not my fault.”

Mrs. Decameron paused for a little while, as if thinking over the past. How was Tressa to know that, instead, she was arranging for the future?

“Miss Dovercourt,” she began again, “Tressa—for I will call you once more as I called you when I was a loving girl, and not an unloving wife—it is a dangerous thing for a woman like me to marry simply to be taken care of, even if the locked doors of her heart close over no wounded but living love,”—Mrs. Decameron was becoming pathetic,—“but it is a mad and a horrible thing for her so to marry, when for ever between her and the man she calls her husband there rises a face which will not be put away, a voice which will not let itself be forgotten. This is the bitterness of life. This is what I have had to bear for years—this is what I bear even now. Have you no pity for me?”

“I have indeed,” said Tressa, strangely

moved by Mrs. Decameron's altered aspect. "And because I pity you I would have you be true—true to others, as well as to yourself. For it is not your own misery only you are working, it is the misery of others who have never done you any harm. Lucy's life is wearing itself away in the slow pain of her husband's lost affection, and you are keeping that affection from her."

For one moment Mrs. Decameron's mask slipped aside, and a glimpse of malignity showed beneath it. It was soon fastened more securely, though.

"I have done a great wrong," she said, "and you justly reproach me. But tell me one thing. Is this known to yourself alone? Have you—have you spoken to Mr. Macnorman about it?"

"No. I thought best to come and speak of it to yourself alone."

"I thank you. You have been very good. You have saved me from an infinite humiliation. Will you yet spare me the punishment which in

your pure eyes I deserve? Will you spare me from being made the byword of the town? Will you grant me that if this, for which you have rebuked me, ceases, you will not use the power which an accidental circumstance gives you over me? As I am henceforth blameless, will you be forgiving?"

"I will," said Tressa; "I only ask that the acquaintance between you and my cousin shall close; that you will yourself bid him back to the only allegiance which is honourable to him. If you cannot be happy, be at least noble."

A strange expression flashed over Bertha's face. She held out her large soft hand to Tressa.

"I must tell you the truth. Mr. Macnorman is coming here again to-night. I arranged that with him last time I saw him. He has a key to the conservatory, and can enter by that way when he chooses. Do not give me all the blame, Tressa. If I have tempted him, he has been willing to be led into temptation. To-

night, then, he will come again, but it shall be to hear me say that it is for the last time. Henceforth my life, such as it has been since I came here, shall be swept away, and I give you my solemn word of honour, if you believe me to have honour left, that after this evening Mr. Macnorman shall never be received by me here. Will you be satisfied, now? I can do no more."

"Mrs. Decameron, I am quite satisfied."

Again that strange subtle flash in the dark eyes.

"Then you will say nothing of this to Mr. Macnorman. You will hold my position safe."

"I will. Good morning, Mrs. Decameron."

"Good morning. Thank you very much."

She touched a little golden bell on the table beside her. Quinto appeared, his white teeth grinning through a pair of lips, which, for size and colour, rivalled those of his mistress. She motioned him to conduct Miss Dovercourt

through the conservatory, and then, with a gentle wave of farewell, swept away to her own room.

She staid there all the morning, thinking her own thoughts, maturing her own plans. When Mr. Decameron came in at two for lunch, he found her still in her morning dress, her hair loose, her face pale, her whole bearing *distracte* and indolent. But he was accustomed to that sort of thing now, and it did not affect him seriously. He knew she would come out splendidly enough in the evening, like a full moon bursting from clouds, as indeed she did intend to do, but not for his enlightenment.

She received him with a lazy indifference which matched her *dishabille*, and spoke not a word to him until the close of the meal, when she said in a half petulant, half imperious tone,

“Theodore, how exceedingly entertaining you are! I have been moping all the morning, and this is the way you amuse me when you come in and find me in low spirits. I cannot bear

this sort of thing any longer. I must have change. I am tired."

Mr. Decameron poured out a glass of hock, held it up to the light, tasted it, made a wry face, and ordered Quinto to take it away, before he replied.

"Did you hear me?" the lady asked, with a perceptible sharpening of her voice. I must have a change."

"So must I, my dear, of wine. This hock, at seven and sixpence a bottle, is perfectly ridiculous. I did think we should have good wines in England, though everyone allows the climate to be villanous. Change you want, do you? I thought you said you should be perfectly happy if you could only get back to Aston-Royal, but it was a little mistake, no doubt. Well, I am quite at your disposal, if you will say where you would like to go. Scotland, Wales, sea-side, the Continent. You certainly do not look well this morning."

Bertha pushed her plate away and turned impatiently from him.

“Continent indeed! I am not going on the Continent. I want a sea voyage. I want my native air. I want entire freedom from society. I want to go back again to the West Indies.”

“To the West Indies, my dear!” and Mr. Decameron twinkled his little black eyes, and ran his lean fingers through his brown wig, and looked round upon his massive dining-room furniture, the best that one of the most fashionable West-end houses could turn out. I did think we were settled here for a time, at any rate; for a time, Mrs. Decameron, not for nine months.”

“Settled, indeed! I told you when we were married I never should be settled, and so you knew what you had to expect. I must go to the Indies again.”

“And at my time of life too,” suggested the shaky old man, who certainly had reason on his side there, at any rate. “A sea voyage at my time of life? My dear! are you thinking of

what you are proposing? Would you really expose me to—to—to—”

“Oh! dear no, nothing of the sort, my darling Dorro,” said his wife, with the dawn of one of her most fascinating smiles brightening her face for a moment. “I would not for the world expose you to anything which could so much as hurt a hair of your head—wig, I mean. There is not the slightest necessity for you to talk about your time of life, though it is a very inconvenient time, I have no doubt, for locomotion. I don’t want you to go with me. You have your wine, and your cigars, and your club, and you can do very well without me, for a year or two. Poor darling! did it think its naughty wife wanted it to undertake a sea voyage at its time of life?”

And Bertha, leaning forward, touched the pieces of dry parchment which Mr. Decameron called his cheeks, with the tips of her soft warm fingers. He kissed them as they passed lightly over his shrivelled lips. She was cer-

tainly a splendid woman, this swarthy, low-browed wife of his, magnificent when she had her best things on, but splendid at any time, and well worth the extravagant price he paid for her. And when she stroked his old cheeks with her soft fingers, and let their velvet touch rest for a moment on his bloodless lips, she was simply irresistible, let her ask what she would. But two years' leave of absence, and her wages paid all the time; her part of the bargain quietly dropped, and his rigorously fastened upon him,—that was more than a man who had once kept slaves could tolerate without a little show of authority.

“I must go back to Cuba, Dorro.”

“With my permission, I presume, my dear. It would not be exactly pleasant, of course, looked at in a merely pecuniary point of view, to dispense with that trifling preliminary.”

“With your consent, or without it. To Cuba I mean to go, and to Cuba I *shall* go. But

come, come, Dorro," and the soft fingers came into play again, and the red ripe lips too. "Don't be foolish. What's the use of our having a thunderstorm about it? A couple of years in the West Indies will bring back my good looks again, and you know, as you married me for nothing else, it would be a thousand pities for me to lose them. Say I may go now for as long as I like, or I shall punish you by turning into a witch, and then wouldn't it be delightful to take me out in yellow satin and diamonds to dinner parties? Will any number of kisses bring you over to reasonableness? for if they will, you shall have them. There now, you will let me go. I know you will."

"For six months only," said helpless weak old December, with June's fierce sunny eyes warming up his decrepitude a little.

"No, for a year, for two years, for as long as I like," said June, with more red ripe kisses melting December down into a terribly sloppy

thaw of tenderness and gallantry. "For as long as I like, Dorro, until I am as beautiful as Hebe again."

"You are that already, my charmer," said December, with a general break-up and dissolution of the exceedingly brief frost of authority. "Do as you like, only take care of your precious health, and come back to me the prop of my declining years. I am not the man I used to be, Bertha."

"Nobody said you were, you delightful old Dorro," said Bertha, letting her coils of loose, untidy black hair rest on his shoulder, "but don't go and do the pathetic over your declining years. You're good for a quarter of a century, yet, because there's nothing of you for anything to get hold of. And now, don't tell anyone about it. I hate to be bored with farewells, and people sending messages out to their relations, and all that sort of thing, and so I just mean to go off without saying a word about it, until the very last. Do you understand,

Dorro? I shall be mortally angry with you if you go and chatter about it at your club. Say you'll be a good, obedient Dorro in this, and I will give you another kiss."

December promised, and June kissed him; sweet essence of truth and nobility that she was, and rolled away in all the charm of her black and amber slatternliness to her own room. It had been a successful luncheon, after all.

She sent her maid with an excuse at dinner time, and did not stir from her couch until, late in the evening, she heard Mr. Decameron go out to his club. Then she arose and donned her bravest attire, and put on her jewels, and braided her hair, and pencilled her eyebrows, and touched her cheeks with rouge, and hid, with the faintest *soupeçon* of pearl-powder, the wrinkles that were beginning to gather on her forehead, and took a glass of cordial to give brilliance to her eyes, and came down in all her state and glory to the drawing-room, where tapers were dimly illumining the gorgeous velvety

gloom, and the perfumed fountain was playing, and a faint scent of orange blossoms came stealing in from the conservatory, and the slow drip of water from the miniature cascade which trickled over fern and moss could be heard mingling with the sweet tones of a musical box which was placed out of sight.

By-and-by other sounds could be heard; footsteps, and a rustle among the citron leaves. Mrs. Decameron started from her cushions, looked forth eagerly; then, as she discerned Romilly Macnorman's well-known figure through the dusky foliage, she leaned languidly back again, and so received him with an indolent smile, and a sleepy glance from her half-shut eyes.

Romilly stretched himself in a low chair by her side, first glancing round the room to be sure that they were alone. Bertha saw the glance.

"It is all right," she said, "Dorro went to his club an hour ago, nearly. I have waited for

you long. I am tired to-night, and heavy and stupid."

Romilly let his eyes travel leisurely over the rich full outlines of her beauty, from the coral wreathed braids of hair which crowned her low flat forehead, to the scarlet and gold-embroidered slipper which peeped out from beneath her black velvet dress.

"If this is the way you look heavy and tired and stupid, you dark queen," he said, "I wish everyone would come to take a lesson from you. I know one house that would be wonderfully brightened if its mistress would follow your example in this sort of heaviness and stupidity. But seriously, Bertha, what is the matter?"

"Oh! nothing is the matter, or rather everything is the matter," she said, languidly stretching out her large white hand, which he took and kept in his. "I am tired of this place, and tired of myself, and tired of old Dorro, who just lets me do as I like with him, and I am going back to Cuba. Dorro says I may go for

six months, or a year if I like, but I mean to go for always. That is just what is the matter."

And after one keen bright look into Romilly's face, she laid her head back on the soft cushions and let her eyelids fall until their dark fringes almost touched the pearl powder and rouge which, in that dim uncertain light, made her look so beautiful still.

"You are going to do nothing of the sort," said Romilly, still holding her jewelled fingers in his. "I shall not let you go away from Aston-Royal whilst I am here. You know you could not do it if you tried."

Another keen bright look, another droop of the heavy fringed lids, a slight movement of the fingers which Romilly held in his.

"You don't know what I can do when I try."

"Yes, I do," said Romilly. "At least, I know what you can do without trying."

She smiled. That was quite as she would have it.

“I suppose I shall be very lonely ; but I must go. It is no use talking about it—I must go.”

“Why must you go ?” said Romilly, that proposal of Mr. Mason’s about the West Indian undertaking flashing for an instant across his mind. “Has any one dared to——has any one——” he sprang to his feet——“has any one been saying anything to you? Have our names been coupled? Have there been spies ?”

And he looked through the open conservatory doors to the groves of citron and azalea, out of whose dense shadow other eyes than those of Bertha might have watched for him. Romilly loved ease, luxury, power, but he loved his reputation more dearly still ; and rather than let that be lost, he would have given up all the rest. Bertha knew that, and had had to guard herself against

it She had long ago cast away the moorings of custom, and drifted out into the great ocean of impulse; but Romilly was his own master, even yet. His heart did not rule him—never would rule him—as hers, so fitful and passionate, ruled her. She knew—and the knowledge made her cringe so submissively to Tressa Dovercourt—that, sooner than have the finger of scorn pointed at him, sooner than have the lustre of his good name tarnished, and himself dishonoured in Aston-Royal, he would break away her bands from him, do without her love, her defiance, her submission, her beauty. All would be lost if he knew that the breath of suspicion had rested on him; and she could not afford to lose all now.

“You need not be afraid,” she said, proudly. “We are quite safe. I have quite as much at stake as you have, and I have guarded it as carefully. But I am tired of this life, where I am tied down and fettered.

I want to be free—I must be free. I must go where I can do as I like, and have those about me always that I care for, without the prying eyes of gossip upon me. And in Cuba no one talks. You can go where you like, and see whom you will, and no one makes you afraid. All this splendour is starving me to death. You have made me hate it. You have made me feel its hollowness. Now I must go. I shall go—I *will* go!”

And then, after a pause, she added, with a long, sweet, luring look—

“I heard a rumour—but perhaps it was only a rumour—that Mr. Mason wished you to go to the West Indies, and that you did not care to go. Would it be different now?”

“Mr. Mason certainly did make some such proposal to me,” said Romilly, hesitatingly; “but—but——”

And they looked into each other's faces,

and then away from each other, still clasping hands, and there was a long silence between them. Would Aston-Royal have so very much to talk about, Romilly thought, if he did change his mind about that West Indian affair? Was not the way still open, and honourably open too? Would not the senior clerk be glad enough to give up his marching orders, and stay quietly at home? and would it not appear a perfectly natural thing for him, as one of the partners in the firm, to represent its interests abroad, say for six months, or for a year—not more than that? Certainly he had told Lucy that he should not go; but it would be very easy to explain to her that circumstances connected with the business had led him to change his mind, that he wanted variety, excitement, experience of life—many things that could not be obtained in a provincial town like Aston-Royal; in short, that a two years' residence—he thought he might as

well say two years—abroad, whilst she and the children stayed behind in the Court-house with good, quiet Tressa, would be just the very thing for him. And as for the falsehood under all these fair appearances, why, one might as well live a falsehood in the West Indies as at home, with this advantage, that one could live it more pleasantly there. He would think it over.

Bertha had turned to him again during that long silence. There was a mist of tears in her eyes.

“Would it be different now?” she said in a low sweet voice, her fingers stirring again within his clasp.

“Of course it would. You know it would make all the difference in the world.”

There were footsteps in the hall.

“Shall I go alone, Romilly?”

“*You shall not go alone.*”

“I knew it would be so.”

And she drew her fingers quietly out of his.

A rustle amongst the azalea blossoms, a crushed flower or two bleeding out its life on the ground beneath his feet, a guilty whisper as the tall ferns kissed each other through the dusky night, and Romilly Macnorman was gone.

CHAPTER XV.

“OH! Tressa darling, what *do* you think?”
said Lucy, about a week after this, as she came into the oriel-room with a basketful of little socks to mend, and Martin tugging at her dress. “Romilly says he is going out to the West Indies after all. Did you ever know such a thing, and when he had quite made up his mind not to go, too? But he has been explaining it all to me so kindly. He says the opening is one which ought not to be neglected, and of course he is much more suitable to represent the interests of the firm than a clerk would be; and Mr. Mason seems so anxious for him to go, and he thinks the change would do him good, and he would not be justified in declining the under-

taking, and ever so much more which I can't remember, but he made it as plain as could be. And then—oh, Martin, you little Turk, what are you doing?"

For Martin had trodden on his mamma's dress and pulled the basket down, and all the socks were tumbling about on the floor, and Martin amongst them, to his great delight.

"Pa go 'way, come back soon," said the little fellow, as he made balls of the socks and tossed them up in the air. "Bring Martin top, bring Martin ball. So glad!"

"Just listen to him. Doesn't he come on nicely with his talking? Papa taught him to say that last night. 'Pa go 'way, come back soon,' and he's always saying it now, like a little parrot. Romilly only accepted the offer last night, finally. He would not speak about it before, because he said it would only distress me, and I should have so much longer to think about it. Wasn't it kind of him to be so thoughtful? I must tell you everything else,

though, by-and-by, when I have brought the rest of my things in from the wash. Just look after Martin one minute, will you, whilst I go for them?"

And away went the little housewife, who never seemed so contented as when in the midst of buttons and babies.

Trèssa's only feeling was of intense thankfulness and relief. She could scarcely even think of Lucy's temporary loneliness, for joy at the greater peace and safety which would result from it; peace for their home in the reverent love of it which could not but grow in Romilly's heart through absence, and safety from the evil fascination which Bertha Decameron was weaving round him, and to which, bright, strong, self-confident though he was, he seemed only too ready to yield. She had passed the time since her visit to Mrs. Decameron in restless anxiety. The interview had indeed been less unpleasant than she had dared to expect, and had ended with at least some prospect of

good result ; but still she could not feel safe until some barrier, either of self-interest or circumstance, parted between these two, whom principle could not keep asunder. Now it was raised, and all would be well. Mrs. Decameron had kept her promise. There was something good about the woman after all. Doubtless she and Romilly had talked fully, faithfully together, of the danger into which they had so nearly drifted ; and as the result of the conversation, they had both agreed that absence would be the best safeguard of honour, at least for a season. She had never thought so well of her cousin, she had never thought so well of Mrs. Decameron, as she did just then. Never had her faith in Lucy's future happiness been so bright. It was but waiting a little while, and the sweet home life, so long empty, ruined and desolate, would be built up again, fairer than before, more strong, more safe. It was but waiting a little while, and the meek, dutiful love which had borne so much and waited so

patiently, would win its guerdon of return, and winning it, spring up once more into the dear happy brightness of the old days. And though they would be able to do without her then, though they would need hand of hers no longer to bring their own together, nor sympathy of hers to form a common meeting place; and though if she stayed in their home at all, she would stay in it as an unneeded alien, still it were better even so, and in their gladness she would find her own content.

When Lucy came back, the two women talked it all over in their own simple, homely fashion; and when Romilly returned for dinner, the subject was brought up again for the definiteness and practicality which a masculine intellect alone could bring to bear upon it. Lucy was rather startled, though, when her husband told her that he should only have a fortnight longer in England.

“The vessel in which we have taken our passage sails at the end of the month, and then

there is all the outfit to be prepared, you know, at least of course mine will not be much, but——”

“We? Who is we?” said Lucy, “I thought you were going by yourself. I thought Mr. Mason said it would be better not to send out anyone else until afterwards.”

“So he did,” answered Romilly, with a shade of vexation upon his face, “but I spoke of the taking of the passage as a transaction of the firm. You ought to know by this time, that in business matters we always use the first person plural. What a little goose you are!”

“Very likely I am,” said Lucy, contentedly. She was always glad when her husband called her a little goose, because he never did so unless he was in a good temper, and he really had been in a very good temper ever since it was decided that he should go out to the West Indies. “But if I am a little goose, I know what an outfit means, because I have had to do with that once already, and however in the world do

you think I am to get all your shirts and collars and handkerchiefs and things done? We shall have to employ half the sewing women in Aston-Royal, shall we not, Tressa? And work our own fingers to the bone, too."

"You are a worse little goose than ever," and Romilly actually kissed the meek, quiet face which was turned towards him. "Do you think I should let you and Tressa do anything of the sort? I shall go and buy it all in town ready made?"

"Ready unmade, you mean," said Lucy, laughing, for the kiss had made her as happy as a queen. "I know well enough what sewing-machine work is. All the buttons coming off just when you want to fasten them, and the stitches disappearing, nobody knows where, if you happen to get hold of a thread and give it a little pull. Don't I know that well enough? And they always do so, too, just when you are in a very particular hurry indeed, and want to look particularly nice, as you won't want to do,

though, on your way out, because nobody knows you and you know nobody. Dear me! how funny it will seem when you are gone. We shall be so very quiet, and I don't suppose any-one will come to see us, because the house will be so stupid."

"Thank you, very much indeed," said Tressa, gaily.

"Oh, dear! Tressa darling, I am sure I beg your pardon over and over again, I quite forgot about you; but even you will not make it like what it is when Romilly is here. You know he is as good as half a dozen men, and no end of women for making people like to talk to him. I'm quite sure Mrs. Decameron won't come to see us any more. I know she only comes because she likes to talk to Romilly, and she always manages to drop in when he doesn't have to go anywhere in the evening. Now, Romilly, do you think she will come to see us again?"

Little Martin, who had been brought down

to sit on papa's knee for a story, was fortunately stuffing a huge bunch of raisins, stalks and everything, into his mouth at this crisis of the conversation, and Romilly had to avert the impending calamity of choking before he averted anything else.

"I don't suppose she will trouble you very much," he said rather hurriedly. "But really, Lucy, you should teach this boy of yours to eat like a Christian. He will be suffocated some day, and then——"

"And then you will say, 'I told you so.' You are always so fond of saying, 'I told you so.' No, little one, they are not going to do anything to you," Lucy said, taking the little fellow, who, having a dim notion that he had done something wrong, and was being talked about, began to whimper. "You shall be mamma's fine big boy, and when papa comes back you shall ride on horseback with him."

"Pa go 'way, come back soon," said the

child, nodding patronisingly to his papa—"come back soon."

Romilly sighed; but then who would not sigh to leave such a bonnie boy as that? For who could tell what chance and change might come to pass before the eighteen months were over; or whether the father's eyes, that looked upon him almost through tears, might ever look upon him again?

So the days went on, quickly enough, until the end of the month, when the vessel was to sail. Lucy, for whom a little affection went a long way, brightened up as flowers do when sunshine comes after rain. For Romilly was so good to her. He had never been so good to her since they were married; and when he seemed sad and regretful, that was almost as good as being kind, because it showed that really, after all, he was sorry to leave her, although he did not make so much fuss about it as some husbands would have done. And then he

talked to her so sensibly about the children, and told her where Rommie was to go to school, and what she was to do with Freddy, if, as was just possible, but not at all likely, he *should* stay away two years. There was no telling how business affairs might turn out; and if he did have to stay away a long time, she was to hold up like a brave, sensible little woman, and let people see that there was real stuff in her. There was plenty of real stuff in her, her husband was quite sure, when the time came for it to be brought out; and of course, when he had gone away and she was left to herself, the time would come. And perhaps, after all, it was the very best thing that could happen to her to be left alone in that way, and be obliged to depend upon herself instead of always leaning on somebody else. Always leaning on somebody else was such a bad thing. It made people so weak by-and-by that they could not stand by themselves at all.

All this, and a great deal more, Romilly said to his little wife as the days drew near that they should part. And Lucy, smiling through her tears, blest him for saying it; and a strange, new gladness came brooding and nestling to her heart, because at last, in the years which lay beyond that short six months of absence—only six months, or twelve at the most—some sweet return would come for all the love she had given, and all the service she had done. And then, perhaps, Romilly would let her be a great deal more to him than ever she had been before, and he would not be so independent of her, and put away so proudly her little womanly offerings of attention and wifely duty. Ah! how pleasant it would be when he *did* come back, and the home palace was built up again.

Then came a great round of farewell parties, at none of which, however, Mrs. Decameron was present; for her health, she said, had

failed very much of late, and it was impossible for her, until she had had complete rest and change for some time, to bear the fatigue of going into society. And Mr. Macnorman, too, people said, was not quite so brilliant as they had known him formerly; seemed to have a weight upon him, could not keep the company alive with his wit, or make the flat champagne of conversation sparkle up more brightly than ever as soon as he entered the room. But then what was to be expected from a man who was leaving such a dear little wife and three pretty boys behind, not knowing what would happen before he came back to them again? It would have been a shame indeed if, under such circumstances, he could have shown much animation. And Mrs. Egremont in particular pitied Mrs. Macnorman, "poor woman," and said she hoped that popular husband of hers would come back safe and sound; but she had her doubts, for the West Indies

were a long way off, and some people's love was out of sight out of mind.

At last the hour of parting came. Lucy kept up bravely to the last, for she did not want her husband's last look upon her to leave a sorrowful memory in his heart. He said good-bye to her alone, in the oriel window, where once, a little white-robed maiden, standing in the moonlight, she had opened for him a door, alas! too sadly barred and bolted since. He held her face between his two hands, and looked into it long, and kissed it often. She had been a good little wife to him. Perhaps, when he came back, things would be different again. At any rate, he felt rather sorry. But then Tressa would take care of her, and a fellow could not always be staying at home.

“Good-bye, child; take care of yourself.”

And when he had gone, Lucy went into her own room, there to weep quietly by herself, and hope and pray and be content.

CHAPTER XVI.

PRESSA did not go away to weep. She had too bright a prevision that all would be well. She did a more practical thing than that, for to leave the house quiet, and Lucy undisturbed, she took Rommie and Freddy for a walk on the London Road.

Coming home they met Mr. Decameron.

He was delighted to see them. So seldom had an opportunity, he said, of shaking hands with Miss Dovercourt. Could not think why Miss Dovercourt kept herself so very much out of society; it really was a shame to hide that pretty face of hers at home, and never let any-one have a chance of falling in love with it. Miss Dovercourt must allow him to be a little

bit complimentary now, for being left a widower, as he might say, he must cheer himself up by doing the polite to the ladies, especially the pretty ones, now and then. Did not Miss Dovercourt know he was left a widower, as he might say? No, really? But then, of course, Mrs. Decameron had kept it as quiet as she could; told none of her friends, for she could not bear the fatigue of calls and farewell parties and all that sort of nonsense, in her present delicate state of health; although he thought possibly it might have slipped out at the old Court-house. Mr. Macnorman, of course, knowing all about it. She had availed herself of the opportunity of Mr. Macnorman's escort to take a trip to the West Indies, for the benefit of her health. Of course, at his time of life, it was out of the question for him to undertake a sea voyage, and therefore he was delighted to place Mrs. Decameron under such safe protection. And were those Mrs. Macnorman's two little boys? Very fine boys, very fine boys indeed; wished he had

two of his own like them; was always fond of children, very fond indeed. And would Miss Dovercourt give his compliments to Mrs. Macnorman, and say that he should do himself the pleasure of looking in now and then? As Mr. Macnorman had run away with Mrs. Decameron, he thought it was only right he should return the compliment by playing the agreeable to Mr. Macnorman's wife. Did not Miss Dovercourt think that was a very neat way of putting it now? Very neat, very neat indeed?

And, quite delighted with this flash of originality, the old gentleman pulled up his collar and chuckled, and twinkled his little black eyes at Miss Dovercourt, and hobbled into his splendid mansion, with its conservatory and its flowers, and its plate and its servants, and the rest of its fine things.

Tressa went home, with all brightness and all hope, and well-nigh all faith in human nature, quenched out of her. This, then, was the end of the pleasant visions she had built up. This

was Mrs. Decameron's honour, this Romilly Macnorman's loyalty. What fair future should spring from such a beginning, what sweet home-palace be built in years to come, on such a rotten foundation of falsehood and deceit? Oh! that she had been silent! Oh! that she had never gone to Mrs. Decameron and revealed her knowledge of the woman's guilt, and so driven her, and with her, Romilly, to this worse depth of shame and degradation! Oh! if she had never seen those flowers, never taken them up and read the message within them, and seen it given and seen it received with those tender looks which had driven her, in the anger of her spirit, to face wrong-doing with rebuke. She had smitten where she meant to bind up, and wounded where her faith and hope would fain have healed. But it was too late now. The thing was done, and could not be undone. She could only wait and pray for heaven to mend all.

They reached home. Lucy, unconscious, de-

served wife, deserted already in heart and faith, though not yet pointed at by the world's finger of pity, was going about the house with smiling, tear-stained face, gathering up her husband's things and putting them safely away until he should need them again. Little Martin, worse than fatherless now, was laughing at her side, and repeating to everyone the baby sentence which he had been so proud to learn.

“Pa go 'way. Come back soon. Come back soon.”

And sometimes, as he looked up into his mother's face, and prattled the sweet words of comfort to her, she would catch him in her arms and kiss the baby-lips whose teaching was so full of hope, and bless the father-tenderness which had taught him, for her sake, to frame such pleasant speech; which truly out of the mouth of babes and sucklings had thus ordained strength for her loneliness and need.

With scarcely restrained tears, Tressa went

to her own room, and staid there hour after hour, for she could not bear to come down again and take her place as though nothing had happened, in the house over which, unknown to any but herself as yet, so dark a shadow had fallen. Let it be unknown whilst it might. Words of hers should not reveal it. In her righteous anger she had already spoken too soon, and bitter had been the fruit of it. Silence now should be her wisdom. So she sat and thought, with a great fear slowly tightening at her heart.

“Oh! Auntie Tressa,” and Freddy came bounding into the room. “Such a nice little boy with such a pretty cap, with a piece of scarlet all round it, has brought a letter for you. What a little postman he is! I never saw such a little postman before, and he says you must give him sixpence for it. Do come and look at his cap, and it has some letters on too. I wish I might be a little postman and have sixpences and such a pretty cap. Will

papa let me, do you think, when he comes back?"

It was a telegram, sent to Tressa from Sideland, a little station on the London line, by Mr. Bardon Limpie, who had been going up to town in the same train with Romilly:—

"Accident on the line. Mr. Macnorman seriously injured. Come at once, yourself."

Tressa showed no signs of fear to little Freddy, who indeed was too much absorbed in the pretty cap with its golden letters, to have noticed them had they been there. She told the servants to say to Mrs. Macnorman that she was going out for a few hours, perhaps might not return until night, and then took the next train to Sideland, which was only ten miles away. Hundreds of people who had heard of the accident, or had friends in the London express, were hurrying to the station. One first-class carriage, she heard, had been shattered to fragments and all its occupants either killed or

injured. The rest of the train had escaped. Romilly and Mrs. Decameron had been travelling together, most likely, as Mr. Decameron had placed his wife under Mr. Macnorman's protection. What of her, then? But no one knew.

Bardon Limpsie was at the Sideland station and conducted Tressa to the little roadside inn, whither the dead and maimed had been carried. It was the old story, told so frequently in newspaper paragraphs, read with careless wonder at many a comfortable fireside, but so feebly understood, save by those whose hearts are stricken under it and whose happiness it blasts. An error of the pointsman, a misunderstanding of the signals, a false light in the distance; and then a collision, and the precious life crushed out of ten or a dozen human bodies—Mrs. Decameron's amongst them this time—and fifteen or twenty more, one of them belonging to Romilly Macnorman, crushed, mangled, maimed, some to crawl slowly back to health again,

some to linger through months of cruel suffering to death.

So ended, for Lucy's husband and Theodore Decameron's wife, the journey begun so bravely by both of them. Yet better so, thought Tressa, as she looked on the calm, dead woman, and the unconscious living man, better so than if it had led them to a death from which there could have been no waking; even the death of all honourable peace, and that unconscious torpor of the soul out of which it can only be shaken to horrible remorse. Heaven had indeed mended all, but the mending had been very terrible.

They brought Mrs. Decameron back, with no light any more in her great brown eyes, and no smile on her pomegranate lips; brought her back quite cold and dead to her splendid home, and her costly furniture, and her flashing jewels, and her obsequious servants, and her doting husband. And a grand coffin was made for her, covered with the richest velvet, and a shroud of

finest cambric was drawn over the once so glowing, passionate face, and a crimson cactus blossom was laid upon her bosom ; and, with a long train of mourners, she was carried forth and buried near the Abbey church of St. Leodegarius. And Mr. Decameron, weeping for her, knew not that heart of hers had never belonged to him, that the wife's ring which he took off as she lay shrouded for her burial, had but given her to him eleven years ago, in a marriage which death had quite put away ; and that the bargain blessed so loudly of men, had been all unblessed of God. Then the world which had so much admired her beauty, let her slip away into forgetfulness, and she slept in peace at last, until that waking in which not the world but God should be her judge.

They brought Romilly Macnorman home, too, after weeks of unconsciousness in that little wayside inn ; brought him home, shorn of his strength, his beauty, his brilliance, everything that he gloried and trusted in, to the old Court-

house; and there in an upper chamber, whose darkened window looked forth over the river to Mr. Decameron's mansion on the London Road, he lay in weariness and pain, until April had blossomed into May, and spring had melted into the flowery fulness of the summer. There, too, whilst Tressa tended the little ones and was as a mother unto them, his quiet, patient wife watched over him, watched until the colour faded from her cheeks, and the shadows which come of grief and weeping brooded under her eyes, and many a streak of grey was laid upon the soft fair curls which once the beams of July sunshine had scarcely been too bright to match.

That was of little consequence now, though. Lucy's face might put on the beauty of a Venus or the pallor of a worn and weary woman, her husband would never look upon it again. When at last, after those long weeks of helplessness, the pulses of life came slowly creeping back, and the feeble limbs had power to stir, and the

trembling lips to frame a few faltering words, Romilly Macnorman was blind, quite blind. No soul would flash any more from those keen blue eyes, which had not always kept their looks of love for her to whom they belonged. No beauty, fair or tawny, would win sweet speech from him again, or lure him from the safe straight road of honour, or bind him in its spell until he forgot alike loyalty, justice, and that self-respect which is as much the crown of manhood as of womanhood.

Blind, and maimed, and disfigured, too. The gay world of Aston-Royal society, which had once held him one of its brightest ornaments, would want none of him now. Small need for a scarred face, such as he must carry to his grave, amongst its wit and beauty. No room for crippled limbs and helpless hands at its dinner-tables and evening-parties. No place for that sightless, groping figure on its public platforms, at its balls, its concerts, its theatres, its flower-shows. No, Aston-Royal had availed itself of

Romilly Macnorman's services so long as he could stir it into brightness and flash the sunshine of his wit upon it; but now, powerless any more to do its bidding, or serve its purpose, he must just creep quietly out of sight, and stay in that obscurity which, society says, is best for those whose work is ended and whose day is done.

Mrs. Egremont said it was a shocking thing, a very shocking thing indeed. She rather supposed Mrs. Macnorman, "poor woman," would have her work set, now. It was a mercy she had not been left a widow, with those three boys to bring up and place out in the world. Though, perhaps, looked at from a common-sense point of view, it would have been just as well if he really had died—because then, being a taking, pleasant sort of woman, she might have found someone else to pick her up and earn a living for her. Sight of both eyes gone, the doctors said. Well, then, he would not be able to flirt with splendid brunettes any more,

and go about with them to places of public amusement, and that, at any rate, would be a relief to his wife. Foot crushed and one arm useless. Very sad indeed, but it would put a stop to his dancing with the pretty girls in Aston-Royal, and that was a blessing, though a blessing in disguise just at present. Disfigured for life, with a great scar across the lower part of his face. A judgment on him for thinking so much about his personal appearance. Everyone knew what a vain man Mr. Romilly Macnorman had been, and what store he had set upon his good looks, and how he fancied nobody could resist him when he chose to make himself agreeable, especially to the ladies. She rather fancied they would be able to resist him now, though men might be scarce in Aston-Royal, as they seemed to be in most places since there was such a rage for colonising; but there were plenty of them left, even yet, to keep a poor scarred cripple like him from doing much more in the way of popularity. He had better begin to

attend to his soul. If report said truly, he had left it to itself rather much of late; neglected it almost as reprehensibly as his poor father used to do, whilst keeping up a flaming profession of religion all the time. And, perhaps, if this providential dispensation had not stopped him in time, he might have made a worse ending of it than his father had done before him. The humiliation of the flesh was sometimes the salvation of the soul, as Mr. Bateson, poor dear man, used to say in those beautiful discourses of his. And for her own part she hoped that Mr. Macnorman would be brought to a conviction of the error of his ways, and abase himself in dust and ashes, and spend the remainder of his poor useless life in repenting of the mischief and frivolity and worldliness of its earlier stages. Then perhaps in the end, he might be accepted, and through infinite mercy struggle into the heavenly Canaan; though an abundant entrance, such as herself and the other members of the Postern Chapel congregation were expecting,

could never of course by any possibility of redeeming grace be vouchsafed unto him.

Mrs. Egremont, dear Christian woman, was partly right and partly wrong. Romilly made a better use of his misfortunes than she, in the boundlessness of her charity, had dared to hope. Blind, halt, maimed, he entered into life. Perhaps only so could he have entered it at all. Perhaps only by some great blow like this, smiting down to the very centre of his being, taking from him all his armour wherein he trusted, riving asunder the crust of pride, assurance, self-confidence which had gathered round his soul, could that soul be given to the light again, and made to look up, humbly, reverently, even as the soul of a little child, to a wisdom wiser than its own. And the blow which took him from himself, gave him back to the wife who loved him so truly. No more for him the smiles of public preference and the flattery of public applause. Only for him now the sheltering care, the daily, tender ministrations of the woman

whom, in his strength, he had forsaken, and in his brightness despised. No place for him henceforth but home, no love but the love which could be won there. And so, his lofty spirit humbled by defeat, and Lucy's weakness strengthened now by the sweet consciousness of being able to serve him as none else could, the foundations of love and trust and faith were deeply laid, and the home life which before had been but a baseless fabric, a house built upon the sand, rose from day to day into fair completeness, fearing not any winds which might arise, nor any rains which might descend, nor any floods which might beat upon it, because it was founded upon a rock.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE summer days began to shorten, but no twilight dimmed the summer of Lucy's life. The trees put off their leafy crown; but no jewels fell from that crown of love which—no thorns within it now—she wore with such a wifely grace. The old year laid him down to die, and the grey December clouds brought their winding-sheet of snow to cover him withal; but Lucy needed no shroud for her happiness any more, and no grave for her content. The year which opened upon Romilly gay, bright, false, unloving, closed upon him sad, suffering, faithful, and true. That Romilly was courted, flattered, caressed; this Romilly was cast out

from the world's remembrance, despised, neglected, forgotten. That Romilly was the pet of society, the idol of drawing-rooms; this Romilly was a helpless cripple, sightless and disfigured, with no wit to dazzle, no brilliance to amuse. That Romilly, in his pride and self-sufficiency, was living a base, mean falsehood; this Romilly, in his humiliation and helplessness, was a brave man, and a noble and a true. Through suffering he became perfect, and through loss of all that once he prized, power, influence, admiration, praise, won a treasure more precious than any of them, even a heart at peace with the world, itself, and God.

“Dear me! it's very sad. I didn't like to give way, of course, whilst I was with him, because, you know, it was only reminding him of what he had passed through; but the sight of him made me feel awful—it did indeed.”

And Mrs. Van Brooten began to mop up her honest tears with a lace-bordered handkerchief. It was the first time she had seen Romilly since his accident, and Lucy had just brought her down from the darkened room where he spent all his time, to finish her call with Tressa below.

“Poor dear fellow! And to think that the last time I saw him almost—nay, I do believe the very last time, except when he called to say good-bye to us—was at Mrs. Mason’s party, where he was the very life and soul of everything, and the ladies so proud and pleased when he danced with them. I always did say there never was such a favourite with the ladies as your poor husband, Mrs. Macnorman, and I believe it was just because he was so very independent of them—never seemed to care whether he made himself agreeable or not; though I daresay he knew well enough he was doing it all the time. I think I see

him now, standing up in that quadrille with poor Mrs. Decameron, and she so beautiful as never was in her black velvet and garnets. I always liked to see those two together; your husband showed to such advantage when she was rallying him up. Oh, dear, dear! he doesn't want any one to rally him now; though I must say he bears it wonderfully, considering what a man he used to be for society and all that sort of thing."

"But you are wanting to be back again to him," continued the bustling, good-hearted lady, wiping her eyes again. "I can see it as plain as can be in your face; and very right too, for of course nobody can do for him like yourself. As I say to James, you may go where you will when things are all straight with you, but there's nothing like a wife when the worst comes to the worst. James laughs, and says I'm the last person he'd like to have about him if he was ill—I'm such a one for shout-

ing and talking; but I say, 'Just you be still and wait till your turn comes, and then we shall see what we shall see.' A wife's a wife, Mrs. Macnorman; and if our husbands don't care too much for us when they're well, they've only to get knocked over a little bit, and they soon find that out."

Lucy went back again with a contented smile to her waiting and watching in the darkened upper room.

"Perfectly awful," Mrs. Van Brooten said to Tressa, when the two were left alone. "I declare it went to my heart to see his poor blind eyes, and how he had to grope about to find my hand when Mrs. Macnorman told him who it was had come to see him. But he's alive; and that's a comfort, isn't it? I always say, only let us keep them, just to look at and take care of, if we can't do anything else. I daresay Mr. Decameron would have been thankful enough if they had brought home his poor wife

smashed to pieces ever so much, as long as there was life enough in her to keep her out of a coffin. Your cousin knows, I suppose, how it ended with her? Bardon Limpsie says they were in the same carriage."

"Yes, we told him as soon as it was safe for him to know. He was very much distressed."

"Of course, poor fellow! how could he help it? He always thought a deal about Mrs. Decameron. I was a little bit afraid at one time he thought more about her than was pleasant to Mrs. Macnorman, but of course that's ended now. And besides, I don't suppose he ever meant anything. It was his way, and she certainly was a woman that no man could stand against."

Tressa was silent. All that she knew lay deeply buried in her own faithful heart. Nay, with that fine touch of honour which is the last finish of true nobility, she did not even humble Romilly himself by telling him how, but for

reticence of hers, the fair outward seeming of his life might have been torn away, and the canker which would have blasted his reputation been revealed beneath. He was making the atonement of suffering for his misdeeds, and to have deepened his shame and purchased power over him by telling, though only to himself alone, what she knew, was a meanness of which Tressa Dovercourt was incapable.

“But I shouldn’t wonder a bit, now,” continued Mrs. Van Brooten, cheerily, “if those two don’t pick up again and come out happier than ever they were before. You know, I said from the beginning that they weren’t cut out for each other, as things were then. He wanted society and excitement and that sort of thing, and she didn’t care a scratch for it; all she wanted was just to stay quietly at home, which of course he didn’t agree to, being such a favourite everywhere. And then you see, with having so much admiration spent upon him abroad, it made him careless of the love of a

quiet little woman at his own fireside. He didn't want petting and coddling, he wanted somebody with dash and spirit to keep well up to him, and fight for her own way now and then, and get it too, as I say to James. But now you see that sort of thing is quite done with, and if you picked the world over for him, you couldn't have found a girl who would have stuck to him in his pain and ugliness like Lucy Thoresby. Why, bless you! my dear Miss Dovercourt, she'd rather have him up there in that darkened room, blind, and lame and disfigured as he is, and feel that she had him all to herself at last, than see him received like a prince in the best society of Aston-Royal, and know that he could do without her as well as not, perhaps rather better. Now don't you think I'm about right, my dear?"

Tressa could not but acknowledge that Mrs. Van Brooten had gone to the very root of the matter.

"Yes; I saw it all as well as could be, and I

said to James as soon as ever I heard that your poor cousin was out of danger, ‘James,’ I said, ‘mark my words, those two will be as happy as turtle-doves from this time forth, see if they won’t.’ Because, you see, my dear Tressa, all that his wife wants is to do for him in her nice domestic way ; and all that he wants now, is to be done for ; and so it’s as straight as a fiddle, though, at the same time, as I said before, it’s a very terrible thing, and I should think the company will have to come down handsomely for damages.”

And then Mrs. Van Brooten drifted off into a speculation as to how many thousand pounds Mr. Decameron would probably accept as a compensation for the death of that magnificent wife of his.

“ Well, little woman,” said Romilly, turning his sightless eyes to the door as Lucy’s footsteps crossed its threshold, “ I am so tired of wait-

ing for you. What a long time you have been away!"

Lucy tripped across the room as lightly as a maiden of eighteen, and tenderly caressed the hand which was feeling out for her.

"You naughty, story-telling Romilly! How dare you say such a thing? And I only just went downstairs with Mrs. Van Brooten to take her to Tressa, and talked to her just a very little bit, and then up here again as fast as ever I could come."

"Well, I only know it seemed a very long time to me, but then the time always does seem long when you are not here. Oh! Lucy, you darling, you darling! how good you are to me, and I was such a wretch to you! Don't you feel as if you could hate me, if you were not too loving to hate anyone?"

"Don't talk like that, you stupid old boy," and Lucy covered her husband's scarred face with a shower of kisses. "You were always as good to me as ever you could be, only I could

not do for you just what you wanted then, and I was such a little simpleton as to fret because you went to those who could. You weren't a bit of a wretch, and I won't have you go and abuse yourself in that way, but I was no end of a goose to make a trouble of it, because you wanted to be happy in your own way."

Romilly turned his face away and there was a mist of tears in the dim blue eyes. Lucy, innocent, trustful little Lucy, did not know out of what valley of the shadow of death his soul had struggled back to healing and health; did not know how far his love and truth and loyalty had strayed. It could do no good to tell her, or lift the veil from scars which he thought were known to himself alone. Perhaps he might be right. Having confessed his fault to God and received forgiveness there, there was no need to bend the knee of penitence and confession elsewhere, or put into human hands that rod from the tree of knowledge, which could smite so sharply. Only now, no love

seemed tender enough, no reverence too deep, for this woman who, patient through all his neglect, and faithful through all his untruth, came to him in his sorest need, and filled his else empty life with the sweet sunshine of her presence.

“Well, and what does Mrs. Van Brooten say?” asked Romilly, after a pause. She was the first lady who had seen him since his terrible accident, and he was still sensitive as ever to the opinions of other people. “I suppose she thinks I am a regular fright, doesn’t she?”

“She said—” Lucy hesitated. “Well, of course she said that it was a very shocking thing, and that you were very much altered.”

“I should think you knew that well enough without her telling you,” he said rather bitterly. “You won’t need to be very proud of your ugly husband now, and you won’t want to walk out in the streets with me any more, for people to say how nice we look together. I wonder what people will think if ever I do go out again?”

“I don’t know, I am sure,” said Lucy, nestling up more closely to him, “but I know well enough what I think. I think you’re the dearest, stupidest, best old Romilly that ever was, and I love you fifteen hundred thousand times better, with your ugly face and your lameness and all the rest of it, than ever I did when you were the handsomest man in Aston-Royal. And if you go and talk like that any more, I’ll stop downstairs ever so long with Mrs. Van Brooten the next time she comes, so you know what you have to expect. But oh! Romilly, Romilly,” and the laughing voice changed to a low tearful sob, “how happy we are, how good God has been to us! People say how sad it is, but I never loved you half so much, and I was never half so proud of you as now; and I wouldn’t change you, blind and scarred and ugly as you are, for what you used to be, when everyone praised you so, and you didn’t need anything that I could give you. Oh! it is happier now, Romilly, for all it is so sad.”

Romilly put his arm round her, and drew her close to him, very close; closer than Bertha Decameron, in all her lustrous earthliness of beauty, had ever come. And as he pressed the dear face to his heart, and as his thin hands wandered over the curls whose gathering grey could never vex him any more, he whispered reverently,

“One thing I know, whereas I *was* blind, now I see.”

CHAPTER XVIII.

IT is nightfall, and Tressa Dovercourt sits at her casement window, looking out through December's thickening gloom to the station lights of Aston-Royal.

Sits there alone, in the cold and in the dark ; yet she heeds them not, for her tryste is with the sweet memories of early days, the sweeter hopes of years to come. And so remembering and so hoping, neither cold nor dark can enter the guarded chamber of a steadfast heart.

Half an hour ago, she left the oriel-room, where Romilly and Lucy and the children are keeping their Christmas eve. They love her very much, but they can do without her now. Tressa knows it, and accepts the knowledge

without one cramp of bitterness. Groping through the darkness, their hands have found each other at last, and need no touch of hers to join them. Her work is done. Enough for her to stand apart and look upon the content, which, in its fair completeness, is for themselves alone.

There is no mist to-night. Bravely and brightly the Christmas chimes ring out from tower, steeple and belfry ; and when they are all silent, soft sweet throbs of chanted music come pulsing forth, as of old, from the stony heart of St. Leodegarius. Tressa listens, and is at peace. Twelve years ago, so listening, she waited Martin Thoresby's coming. He came, and brought the summer to her heart. Again, keeping her watch by the restless, melancholy sea, her Christmas music the murmur of its waves along the shore, the splash of surf around its sharp-toothed rocks, she waited, and he came ; dead, but true and faithful still. Once again she waits in the gloom and in the silence.

Will he come? For now, as then, her finer spiritual sense is conscious of an unseen presence, a passing to and fro as of angel's wings upon the empty air. Who is near? She cannot tell. There is no face, no voice; yet Tressa knows she is not alone to-night.

The flickering choir-lights, as they gleam through the lancet windows of the old Abbey church, reveal the dim figures of saints and martyrs, with clasped hands and flowing robes and crowned brows. Sometimes there is a hush, sometimes a burst of jubilant song, sometimes the cadence of a chanted Amen. And sometimes the laughter of Christmas chimes from churches far off and near, overflows everything else with its clear, carolling joy.

Tressa rises hastily. She will go before the prayers are over. She will keep her vigil with Martin Thoresby, not here at her casement-window, but yonder, at the altar stair, close by the deserted Lady Chapel. Perhaps

he will hear the music, too. Perhaps he will know that, listening to it, her thoughts are all for him. So she dresses and hurries away, but turns aside for a moment to say good-bye to them in the oriel room.

It is a pleasant picture. Romilly is propped up with pillows in his great easy-chair, Lucy is kneeling by him, her head on his shoulder, his hand stroking the soft curls, which can no longer give back gold for gold to the sunshine when it smites upon them. Romilly does not care for that now. When they are snowy white, he will not be ashamed of them, nor of the quiet face which they shadow. The children are tossing and tumbling over each other on the carpet, playing at snap-apple with a great red-cheeked Ribston pippin which Lucy has hung to the chandelier. Sometimes she starts away from her husband's side, and makes a playful raid amongst them, and then loud are the bursts of merriment as mamma tries in vain to set

her white teeth into the yet unwounded apple. Then back to Romilly again, her head in its old resting-place, her hand locked in his, where it is always at home now.

“Going out, Tressa?”

“Yes, I want to hear the Christmas-eve anthem, and say a prayer or two on the altar steps.”

“There is no need for that, I am sure,” Lucy says, “you look as if you had always just done saying your prayers. I wish you could see her, Romilly, this Tressa of ours. Come here, pet, and let him put his hand on your face and feel how round and soft your cheeks are. I don’t know what we are to do with her, Romilly; she seems as if she was determined not to grow old like the rest of us. Is it the ‘something very beautiful’ which you are always waiting for, Tressa?” she adds in an undertone, as Tressa with a smile comes and kneels by her cousin’s side. “It must be very near now, for you look so fair to-night.”

Blind Romilly takes a hand of both and holds them together in his own.

“Come close up to me, dear old girl,” he says. “She has been a good Tressa to us, hasn’t she, Lucy, in the dreary days that used to be? We should have been a terribly tedious couple, Tressa, if we hadn’t had you to talk to us, and brighten us up sometimes.”

But Romilly does not know, never will know, how much more precious has been Tressa’s golden silence than her silver speech.

“And now you can do without me,” she says gaily, “and so I think I shall go and set up for an old maid at the south end of the quadrangle. I am sure the Corporation will let me have a couple of rooms there, and one of you will give me a cat and the other a kettle, and then I shall sing for joy; at least the kettle will, and I shall keep it company, very often.”

“Such nonsense!” and Lucy playfully pushes away the hand which is resting with her own in Romilly’s. Romilly feels for it, and brings it

back again. "You shall never set up for an old maid anywhere, but here at the old Court-house with us and the children; shall she, Romilly?"

"Tressa will never set up for an old maid at all," says Romilly. "If she lives to be ninety, Tressa can't be an old maid, for she has the child heart, and that keeps her always young."

"I wish I had it too, then, if it would make me look so atrociously juvenile. Nobody would believe she is a whole year older than I am. There ought to be an act passed to oblige her to put on wrinkles and crow's feet at once. I'll rebel, I will indeed, if she persists in roses and roundness when you and I are looking for all the world like bits of dried up parchment."

"And I'll rebel, too," says Tressa, "if you keep me here any longer, making fun of my spinster-hood. I shall not hear a single note of that beautiful anthem if I don't go away directly. Good-bye, now, both of you."

Romilly feels for her head and bends it towards him.

“ Kiss me, Tressa.”

He has never asked her to do that before, but she does it.

“ And me too,” says Lucy.

Tressa kisses the happy wife, who needs so little now that anyone but her husband can do for her.

“ And me too,” pipes little Martin, leaving snap-apple to come and see what is going on round papa’s chair; “ me too,” and he holds up his rosy button of a mouth to Tressa.

Tressa stoops down and folds him in her arms, the laughing little lad who wears her Martin’s name. Some day may he win to her Martin’s strong, true manliness; and some day, later still, to Martin’s angel-hood.

“ Aunty go ’way, come back soon,” says the child, as Tressa, with a loving, lingering look upon them all, goes out, alone, into the darkness.

There is a doorway through the moss-grown wall of the Court-house garden, and thence it

is but a step to the Abbey. Tressa goes to her own place, close by the Lady Chapel. The stone beneath her feet bears Martin's name upon it. Perhaps nearer than the graven name, is the presence of him who bore it once, and, dying, left it so stainless and so fair. Tressa kneels. No one sees her there in the quiet gloom of the Lady Chapel, for most of the worshippers like to say their prayers in the brightness and warmth and glow of the choir. It has been bravely garlanded for Christmas tide, but Tressa is too far off to see its beauty. Wreath, device, monogram, and legend, are all blended in one mass of colour, even as voice of priest and response of chorister melt before they reach her ear into a confused murmur of sound. The anthem begins, the Christmas-eve anthem.

“There were shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flocks by night.”

A sweet sudden burst, as of angel music ; then one full-voiced chord, falling slowly into silence, as the rustling white wings sweep upward and

vanish in the still December dark. Have the angels all gone? or does one of them linger still? For Tressa feels that she is not alone to-night.

The closing prayers are read. She lifts her eyes to the great oaken cross over the choir gates. Lo! it has blossomed into a splendour of purple and red, with flowers which bring their message to her from Him who once was stretched thereon. Is it so, then, that the cross of her human suffering shall blossom into splendour, and flowers whose sweetness is from heaven, spring out to cover with their glory and their glow the symbol of deepest earthly pain?

“Evermore. Amen.”

She hears these words, falling as from some infinite distance upon the silence within and around her. Then the worshippers steal slowly out, and the lights are extinguished, save one here and there, and the pomp of worship ceases, and there is a great calm.

The organist stays behind to play over his anthem for to-morrow. Tressa kneels still in her quiet corner by the Lady Chapel, kneels and listens, none knowing that she is there. When the anthem is done, he begins to speak to himself in music, perfect music, leading into that upper chamber whence the soul looks forth to God and finds Him not far off. It wears itself away at last, in a few wandering, uncertain notes, which brood over the depth of silence, like white-winged birds rising and falling upon the murmuring sea, when winds and waves are at rest. Then he comes out from his organ oratory, and on his way to the Lady Chapel, where the chants and manuscripts are kept, passes a solitary worshipper, still kneeling by the altar stair.

He speaks, but she does not answer. He touches her, but she does not move. He looks into her face; it is very calm and still, with the calmness and the stillness

which come but once, and coming, never go again. Then he knows that his music has been the death-song of the kneeling woman there, and that on the tide of his melody a human soul has been floated home to rest.

“Died by the visitation of God.”

So they say. As if people could die by any other visitation. As if that subtle and mysterious change, which we call death, could pass over any existence save by the touch of Him who thus quickens it into a more beautiful life, and calls His loved ones from the gloomy altar stairs, where, weeping, they feel dimly after Him, upward to the great white throne and the open vision and the grand, sweet calm of heaven.

So came and went the last of Tressa's three Christmas eves.

THE END.



“ And one hath seen the vision face to face ;
And now his chair desires him here in bairn,
Howeber they may crown him otherwhere.”

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